

THE LURE OF CROONING WATER

By MARION HILL

SOME EARLY REVIEWS

MR. CLEMENT K. SHORTER, in *The Sphere*:—
“The best novel that I have read in the present year. It is a pretty and indeed brilliant story. I repeat that the book has infinite charm ; it is a distinct addition to good fiction and I can very heartily commend it.”

The Daily Chronicle:—“We fully expect that the name of this novel during the months to come will be often in the mouths of the multitude.”

The Times:—“Georgette, an actress, scintillates in every page, and is immensely alive.”

The World:—“A book teeming with literary charm.”

The Standard:—“Miss Hill has a vast gift of humour.”

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The Lure of Crooning Water

By
Marion Hill



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Who told the story in the first place

The Lure of Crooning Water

CHAPTER I

OUTSIDE in the street the startling scene which had taken place on the stage a few minutes earlier was already beginning to have its boring side.

As the reluctantly dismissed audience poured out of the theatre, entered but a scant hour ago, and found themselves confronted anew with the problem which had seemed so satisfactorily settled, the serious problem of how to spend the evening, they discussed Georgette Verlainé's breakdown in tones which held accusation, plainly hinting that she could have lost her memory and power of speech quite as well after the last act as after the first, if she had only given the matter a little unselfish consideration, which actresses never do.

"But it's a better advertisement this way," explained a commercial young woman to her escort.

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He, being a studious youth from the country, remarked acquisitively :

" Ah ! So that's it."

" *Mercy!* Didn't it make your flesh *creep*, the way she *ker-flopped?*" shrilled an excited girl of the Italic Age. " When she went *zippp*, I could have *shrieked*. Do you guess it was *real?*"

" I have heard of 'your money refunded,' but this is the first time I've seen it. Feels like pay-day," said a satisfied baritone.

" Inexcusable not to have had an understudy," fretted an old man. " We may now never see this play as it was written, for the bloodhounds of censors have been baying on its track since the first rehearsal. It was Georgette Verlaine's moral duty to have had an understudy."

" Oh, no, you don't, Sweetie," expostulated a magnificent young lady, addressing her gentleman friend, who, with a general air of just having had his life saved, was trying to put his recovered cash back into his pocket-book. " Little Billy-boy's not let off so easily as that, by a big sight. If you think all the show-shops are shut up just 'cause this one is, you're very much mistaken. So trot to a new box-office while you're still fresh."

" This caper of Verlaine's is no surprise to *me*," insisted a reporter, wonderfully satisfied.

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"I've been looking for it almost any night, she's been so short of the mark."

"What a ghost she looked!" commented an awed boy hoarsely.

And his remark was the nearest approach to sympathy which the stricken actress received from those whom the Press called her "city full of friends," they dispersing in that defrauded frame of mind which inclines people to be indignant with entertainers who fail to entertain, the cause being an unimportant side-issue.

In the theatre behind the scenes where Georgette's mates were reappearing from their dressing-rooms, their make-up hastily removed and street costume donned, her mental collapse was being discussed from a more human viewpoint, but still as a personal calamity in which she herself was far from being the person paramount. It was their engagement that was ended. What was to become of them?

"The poor dear!" exclaimed Arrah Harrington, the little *ingénue*, heartbrokenly. But she showed where her thoughts were straying, borne there by sheer force of their own heavy weight, in adding, "Still, she's got money enough stowed away to keep her on Easy Street, Sunny Side."

"And what did the doctor say?" asked the leading man of a stage hand to whom, under the

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levelling influence of curiosity, he was talking with unusual democracy. The stage hand had been in the thick of the recent mêlée and excusably felt himself to be a leading man, too, for the moment.

"What doctor?" threw in another.

"How did the doctor get here so quick?" interposed still another, the juvenile, a promising young man, yet of an obscure home life which accounted for his taking off his grammar with his grease-paint, as he did nightly.

"I 'phoned him. Dr. John Congdon. He said," replied the stage hand, answering backward and getting dizzy looking from one to the other of his questioners, "as he didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" arose in prompting chorus.

"What Miss Verlaine had or how she got it or what to do for it or how long it would last."

"What *did* he know?" piped the little *ingénue*.
"Poor Georgie!"

"Knew she had ought to be took to her hotel right off. So he done it."

"Could she walk?"

"No, indeed," sang out the stage hand, repelling the insinuation as a slur. "She was carried stiff as a sofa."

"The poor dear!"

Here the stage manager appeared, and without

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troubling himself to converse pinned up a dismissal notice for the evening, calling a meeting for ten the next morning.

"When we'll get ours," prophesied the juvenile man truly.

Reaching the back door they found Kin, the property boy, leaning up against it in a state of palpable disarrangement of some sort.

"Here! What's the matter with you?" fumed the carpenter, giving Kin a push as a reviver. One invalid at a time was evidently all he could put up with.

Kin turned a drawn young face upon them.

"She looked so! Carried by me!" he gasped. Then, as if to excuse his unmanliness, "She always, always treated me white."

"Who doesn't she treat 'white'?" demanded Arrah defensively.

"Georgette Verlaine," answered the leading man, who was famed for his pithy paragraphs. This once his brevity covered a lot of ground.

Then the company scattered through the streets, they too feeling as perplexed as the audience by the present of the night's freedom.

And by the end of another hour, in a near-by hotel, Georgette, comfortably forgotten by all, was coming languidly back to remembrance, partial remembrance of herself.

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Lying flat on the profusely embroidered hotel "davenport," one of those gorgeously useless pieces of furniture with gigantic sausage-like rolls at each end, she was a bizarre and rather touching little figure, the paint still on her cheeks. Her white, pretty arms were stretched limply above her head, her small hands open. She looked like a child at the gate of death begging for life.

In an endeavour to make homelike the gaudy barn of a room, her maid had done the little there was to do, had torn covers from magazines in order to fashion makeshift shades for the glaring electric bulbs, had drawn the dusty golden window-curtains, and had carried the heavy-odoured flowers into a vestibule, leaving only some roses on mantel and table and piano.

"Leave her alone," had ordered the doctor shortly, when she had attempted to remove from her stricken mistress the unspeakably fantastic stage costume which she still wore. Fluttering her eloquent French hands remonstratingly, the maid had withdrawn herself to a far end of the apartment, outraged in all her Gallic sense of fitness : when a madame had exquisite gowns for *invaliderie*, also the bewitchingest of sandals to match, it was a thousand tons of pities for that madame to be stretched on a couch still in bedizenment, like a discarded, broken marionette.

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Sometimes counting the respiration, sometimes listening to the heart-action, occasionally administering a restorative, but more often motionless and undemonstrative as stone, John Congdon sat by the side of his patient and studied the symptoms of her reawakening. Finally, when she opened her eyes and silently looked long at him, he as movelessly stared back at her.

"Why, that was my cue," she whispered at last, and tried to rise.

"You are mistaken," he said, putting her back on the pillow.

His voice, though a stern one and of few inflections, was always to be trusted, so she let herself believe him, and was quiet.

Then, "What scene is on?" she asked after the pause.

"Perhaps the last one," he pronounced very deliberately.

The shock of this steadied her wandering wits.

"You mean——?" she asked tremblingly. She could get no further.

"That the curtain is rung down."

At the repeated brutality, or what sounded like it, the sympathetic maid in the background put out praying, appealing hands. But the doctor knew his patient.

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"It is rung down."

Georgette took her glance from his face, and let it travel dazedly around the room. "Why, I am not at the theatre—I am home." Home! Then she sat up quickly and caught at the arm of his chair to steady herself. "Oh, John Congdon, don't tell me that it has come!"

"What do you mean by 'it'?" he queried.

"What I have feared," she said, evading the direct reply.

"What have you feared?" he insisted, refusing to spare her.

Here the shadowy maid flung out her praying hands again.

"Get out of the room," he ordered, without bothering himself to look in her direction. He was a man who seldom had to speak twice, even to women, and the girl made a swift exit, looking as if her mistress were thrown to the lions—which was almost true.

Made strong by sudden anger, Georgette rose to her feet and paced up and down the room, pelting the doctor with furious phrases of negation, as if in answer to his very silence. All her movements and gestures, like her words, were swift and unexpected, but so definite and fit that she kept an auditor always well keyed-up and expectant. A person never wanted to miss any of it.

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"I am *not* ill," she stormed, her small pale face defiant. "Nor even worn out. There is no need for me to rest. No sense in it. None. Leave the stage indeed, at this very moment of my best success! And my mind is *not* tiring itself out. It is not. Nor am I 'burning the candle at both ends.' Not too much, at any rate. And it is the tritest kind of a simile! A really clever doctor ought to be able to think of a newer phrase. It is your trade to frighten. To frighten! But me—you can't, you can't! I refuse to consider a transient weakness serious!" Next, one of her lightning changes came to her—tactics, expression, voice, all softened to tenderness. She stopped by his chair, looked wonderingly at the stone-like coldness of his face, then bent down to him as caressingly as a child, her hair against his, saying appealingly under her breath, "John Congdon, tell me what to do." The words were given him like a kiss.

"I will," he said, unmoved. "Go to that glass and take a good look at yourself."

She obeyed; and the sight of herself in the mirror filled her with impatient disgust.

"A nice Meg Merrilies!" she commented in a furious whisper, and with cream and towels proceeded to cleanse her face. After one or two futile struggles with her hair, she gave up trying to pre-

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serve its massed elaborateness, so pulled it loose and plaited it down her back. As she studied this new reflection, one which was both less artificial and less assuring—all the while sincerely regardless of the watchful stoic in the arm-chair—her anger turned to perplexity, and perplexity to fear.

“What is the matter with me?” she asked finally, her usually ringing voice dull with dread. “What am I to do?”

“Come here and sit down on the sofa.” The mirror had done a great deal of his talking for him, as he knew it would.

“I look thirty-five years old,” she said, taking the bidden seat in front of him, and gazing at him imploringly for contradiction.

He gave it characteristically.

“Nearer forty-five.” After dropping this remark, he waited in his usual taciturn fashion for it to hit a vital spot.

She twisted her thin, pretty hands in the lace of her dress. Then she exploded nervously:

“Well! Well! Well! The sentence? Get at it!”

“I’ve told you often enough,” was his dictum, as he noted her restless movements with just that analytical interest he would have bestowed upon a butterfly which might be pinned, struggling, to a paper. He freely conceded her charm, just as he

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would have conceded the iridescence and fragility of the butterfly's wings. The thing, though, was a side-issue, and had no bearing upon diagnosis. One affair at a time was John Congdon's sound motto.

"I'm to rest, I suppose," Georgette answered him angrily. "And if I don't?"

"For one thing, you may get locomotor ataxia."

"Nonsense! Only bad old men get that."

"Why not bad young women?"

"John Congdon, stop! Don't go too far. I'm not bad. You know it."

"Are you a good young woman?"

"You know I am."

"What is good about you? Do you call your vain, painted, frantic aim to be a 'star' good? Look at this room you live in. Do you call this gilt-ceilinged attic good, for the one reason that the cost is more than the worth? How about the hours you keep? Do you call them good? And the fat-pursed, thin-brained men who hang around—how good are they? See the gown you have on—low-shouldered and needing cleaning at the hem—is that good? You go joy-riding all night, and greet the grand old sun with a blink. Is that good? You listen by the hour together to speeches of half-gallantry, whole impudence, and you fling back witty parries, and call yourself good. As if a woman

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is 'good' just because she keeps out of the world's gutter! There's no complexity about a woman's goodness. It's a duty, as bright as daylight. You good! Why, where is your home-garden, your flower-like children?"

"Flower-like fluff! Where are yours?"

The metal of his voice grew momentarily golden as he answered reverently:

"In my heart of dreams, at any rate."

"Keep them there," advised Georgette cheerfully. "Their shoes will cost less."

"And if not locomotor ataxia," he resumed evenly, "you may lose your mind—what you have."

Again he paused, and his silence was terribly significant to one who knew him as she did.

"Lose my mind!" The words were echoed blankly. Then, as swiftly and quietly as grain falling under the knife, she shuddered down among the pillows, hiding her face and whispering, "I knew it."

When she lay prone and quivering, he pushed back his heavy chair gratingly. Then he got up deliberately, walked over to the piano, opened it, and played methodically all through without missing a note, "Du bist wie eine Blume." His touch was a heavy one, but of wizard skill. As he bent his big, well-knit, well-conditioned body

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lovingly over the keys, making them sing slowly and deeply, it seemed as though he had nothing on his mind but the pleasant task of seeing how close his hands could come to making the notes say the words of Heine that are wedded to them.

When he finished artistically and went back to his chair and his patient, she was sitting up, waiting for him, pale and conquered.*

"I will do as you advised," she said tonelessly.

"I was prepared for that," he said, taking a letter from his pocket, "two weeks ago. So I wrote to them. And they will have you."

"Very kind of everybody, all round," she said, her lips curling. "Suppose you explain."

"They are farmers. I am going to send you to their farm. You are to stay there for four months."

"Off and on," she intimated airily.

"On," he corrected, bringing down the word like a steam-hammer. "Four unbroken months at the very least."

"I couldn't stand it!" she cried, her foot tapping the carpet.

"You must and will. To cure you, rest and change must be absolute. You are not to take your maid with you, nor to have your letters forwarded, nor to write letters, nor to get telephone messages or wires."

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"But instead of these diversions—what?" sarcastically angry.

"You are to go to bed with the chickens——"

"Same roost or separate?" furiously.

"Rise with the sun——"

"I simply will not." She fought his earnestness petulantly.

"Drink milk——"

"I loathe and despise it."

"Drink milk; eat bread and butter——"

"I can see myself!"

"Have dinner at noon——"

"Absurd. Only horses eat dinner at noon."

"And a light supper at night." The regimen was finished.

"I couldn't live!" she declared stubbornly.

"Rache and Horry live."

"Who?" She clasped her knees. Her eyes danced impishly.

"In the census they are probably down as Rachel and Horace Dornblazer."

"Worse and worse! They should stay in the census. So I am to live four unbroken months with Rache and Horry?" She mentioned them as if they were trained pigs.

"If they can stand you," said John Congdon thoughtfully.

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“ ‘Horry Dornblazer.’ What a damnable name ! ”

“ Let me advise you not to say damnable in Horry’s hearing. He might not think you as good as you claim to be.”

“ And what do I care for Horry’s opinions ? ”

“ Nothing now. But a great deal soon. At least I hope so. It is not alone your run-down nervous system that I want to build up by the regularity and peace of country life ; it ought also to straighten the warped, vitiated, unnatural line of thought you——”

She gave him a swift, impudent, friendly pat under the chin which effectually annoyed him to silence.

“ Cut out the fatherly correction, John Congdon. Put it down in the bill, if you like, and I’ll pay for it. But cut it now. Tell me more about this dream of a retreat you’ve planned. Is Rache his sister ? ”

“ Rache is his wife. If you are already contemplating the refreshment of a flirtation with Horry, let me tell you you can’t do it. Save yourself the effort.”

“ I can’t do it ? ”

“ No.”

“ H’m.” Then, with tardy resentment, “ Flirtation ! You must think there is never anything else in my head ! ”

“ Nor is there. Lacking a man, you would flirt

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with the afternoon shadow of a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store."

"Not if there was a tailor's dummy on the same block, John," was her winning defence.

"Well," gravely and sternly, "there's no tailor's dummy at Crooning Water."

"Crooning Water? The name of the farm?"

"Yes."

"Very pretty. He's something of a poet."

"She named it. And she's nothing of a poet. She's practical. That is how she managed to hit on so pretty a truth as Crooning Water. It is the brook that croons day and night. It runs through the farm. You can busy yourself keeping the children out of it."

"Horry's children?"

"Also Rache's."

"How many? Doves?"

"Two. At least there were. But that's over a year ago. There may be three."

"As regular a crop as that?"

"Their names," he went on steadily, "are quite pretty. But I've forgotten. Pretty, like themselves. Citified names, ending in 'ine.'"

"Gasoline and Vaseline."

"Georgette," he said suddenly, "is there no gentle spot in your heart?"

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"Only the one you occupy," she said pleasantly.

They gazed at each other so stonily that their eyes seemed to shoot sparks like flint. Then she gradually let amusement creep into hers, and something more, so that he finally flinched.

"You are not safe," he accused, standing angrily.

She rose, too, with graceful, tantalising readiness.

"Going, John?"

"Not at all safe. Why, why——" He appeared to be struggling to keep back something terrible. But at last it shot out. "Why, for the moment, I wanted to kiss you! I wanted to kiss you!"

"Well, why didn't you?" she questioned indifferently. "Every man I meet kisses me sooner or later. And so will you."

"With me it will be later," he announced coldly.

She dealt this rude security a blow.

"Not if I decide in favour of sooner."

On the point of contradiction, he studied her intimately, and then said shortly :

"Granted."

"But there is not the slightest danger of my so deciding," she assured him coolly. Insolence acted as a tonic, and she looked bright and well, so alarmingly well that he was quietly alert and watchful. To punish him thoroughly for the

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"later," she went on explainingly: "I only let real men kiss me. You are a doctor. That bars you out, you see. A doctor is a sort of a cross between a trained nurse and a parish priest."

"Take only your plainest frocks and things to Crooning Water, for you will doubtless have to wash them yourself. There is no laundry in that part of the world."

"Trained nurse, parish priest, and parlour-maid. Also the undertaker's hope. Do any women fall in love with you, doctor? What sort? And what do they call you? 'John Congdon' has an uncompromising sound, like a coffin full of bones. Do they call you Hans? Jack?"

"Stop! You are tiring yourself."

"Talking about you? Oh, no."

With the curving, teasing smile still on her lips, and so easily that it looked more like make-believe than the real thing that it was, she fell quietly forward in one of her sudden faints. He caught her in his arms. Her long swinging braid of hair twisted over his wrist like a clinging hand. He went through an orderly process of detaching it and arranging it in a neat line over her shoulder and across her breast. Then he compactly lifted her. Feeling herself carried to the sofa, she murmured gibly, though out of the depths of utter unconsciousness:

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"Now I'm done for, you can go to the piano and play some more. Makes me think of 'Now my wife is underground, Oh, what joy shall abound, Earth shall cover her, I'll dance over her——' John, don't let me die. I don't want to die yet. There must be more in life than I have known. I want it. How well you play! How well you play!"

With a deep sigh she sank into muteness.

"Jane, Mary, whatever your name is, come here," ordered Congdon of the retirement which had swallowed the maid.

"Cora," she said politely, appearing. Then with real feeling: "Oh, the poor sufferer, my sweet Miss Georgette. What is it I might do for her?"

"You might hold your tongue and loosen her dress."

While swiftly working among the multitude of phials in his case, he was thinking thriftily ahead: "This sort of thing is capable of worrying Rache. I don't know that it will. But it may. I'll write her a few directions to-night." Then aloud: "Stop putting pillows under her head. If you must put them somewhere, put them under her feet. What time is it?"

"Eleven and five minutes," said Cora, taking his sane suggestion in regard to the pillows to be

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sarcasm, and flurriedly ramming them out of sight beneath the lounge.

"Get her to bed and to sleep as soon as you can—she is coming out of the faint—and then pack her trunk——"

"Trrrunk? *Mon Dieu!*"

"—with stout sensible shoes and short-skirted, washable, simple dresses——"

Cora triumphantly repelled both insults:

"Miss Georgette has none. Of neither."

"I might have known it. Do the best you can, then. The chief point is to have all in readiness by two to-morrow. She is going into the country. And you are not going with her."

"The extraordinary things to tell me," cried Cora, flicking them from her with the back of her hand as if they had been bats. "La, la, la-la-la! The country! And what is she going to do there?"

Dr. John Congdon, at the doorway, taking his usual abrupt, unceremonious leave, stopped a second to cogitate.

"You have happened to hit upon a very pertinent question, my good girl," he said frowningly. "Very pertinent. There is no predicting what she is going to do there."

Then he went.

CHAPTER II

THE whole company went down to the Hoboken Ferry to see Georgette off, turning that dingily prosaic place into a brief *opéra bouffe* aspect of laughter, gay dresses, bonbons, bouquets, auto-horns, assorted chocolates, magazines, and pet dogs on ribbons.

Harvey La Farge, the leading man, in his new seven-passenger unpaid-for car, took Georgette herself and nobody else. It was *his* week for being the man upon whom Georgette seemed to be exclusively relying for friendly attentions. Last week the man had been Brice Gunning, the lean reporter. He also came down to see her depart, but had to console himself with Arrah Harrington, who was lovely in a startlingly "simple" costume of white and blue which marked her for an *ingénue* a mile off. Even the tiny white dog which she drove with blue reins was part of the general effect, and it was, caninely, an *ingénue* all by itself, getting picturesquely blown like a puff of innocent thistle-down in among the hurrying feet of the travelling public, and being rescued from these situations

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of amiable notoriety with its small head lopped engagingly sidewise, its pink tongue-tip bewitchingly showing, and quite a smile on its face. After each rescue, too, it dabbed frantic kisses on the rescuer and then foolishly hied away into new trouble—very *ingénue*.

Earl Kent, the juvenile man of more promise than grammar, was also one of the party, but he was so self-centred with the agony of finding out the brilliant greenness of his new suit in the sun that, in order to tether his thoughts upon the real occasion, he forced himself to gasp out from time to time: "Poor Georgy! Dear Georgy! Po' de' Georgy!" And he pronounced it "Judgy." His suit was very green.

"Pipe up some tune less devilish or die," ordered Georgette, hardened by his very emotions. She was excited and altogether far more ill than she looked. It is only one who is safely convalescent who can stand being called a "poor dear."

From head to foot she was in grey—surely a conventional enough colour for a travelling gown—but anything less conventional, more glitteringly pretty than she cannot be imagined. Her beaded *suède* shoes suited a minuet better than the rail, her silk coat was more dashing than a domino, and her hat—which was a mere hat only when in its box.

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or on a bed—became a stunning crown of glory as soon as it topped her hair, whose beautiful masses she wore in a style which, though conforming to the *mode*, aimed at and achieved the admiration mark.

The same smart accentuation of correctness is what made her comrades also noticeable. Their clothes were indubitably what they should be, but instead of being worn with high-bred forgetfulness, were flaunted with a challenge which gave them a positively advertising quality. Even Cora, who magically stepped from a taxi at the right moment, was so lithographically the typical French maid that she needed only footlights to have sung a risky little song right then and there. To be French was the only duty left to Cora, for everybody else was serving Georgette in her stead. Kin, happy and fagged, lugged the pearl-grey suit-case, glorying openly in its glaring bridal-like newness, taking patient pains to carry it with its silver-initialled side always to the public. Arrah held some votive violets, sniffing them rapturously now and then in pretended envy. Marjorie Mensing, veiled heavily to disguise the fact that she was unbusinesslike enough to be twenty years older by day than by night, made her majestic self a willing slave by carrying the magazines. She could not resist the

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temptation, though, to show that her condescension was that of real genius, so called out clearly :

" Did I tell you, Georgette, I got a new job this morning ? Got with Lacy's big show. A dandy part. How does that sound ? "

" It sounds immense," praised Georgette unstintedly. She had a companionable way of unconsciously adopting the lingo of whoever talked to her, and, whether with emperors or cabmen, adjusted herself to the level.

Just now she was ensconced apart, and up high, on a stool upon the observation platform of the Pullman car, her adherents being bunched below her, getting their effective farewells ready.

Harvey La Farge stood as close to her as he could, which was at the rail, and he talked in those low, deep tones of tender proprietorship which would make " Pass the butter " sound slightly illicit.

" You'll write me, George ? " he said with well-simulated huskiness.

" Can't," said Georgette positively. " John Congdon won't let me."

" Then we'll write to you," said the hopeful Brice.

" Mustn't. John Congdon won't have that, either."

" Now wouldn't you have thought the miserable

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brute would have been down here ? ” questioned Marjorie.

“ No, I shouldn't,” negatived Georgette.

“ Writing barred, we'll send you novels. Fast as the bad ones come out, we'll mail 'em,” promised Arrah, giving her *ingénue* poodle a last smell of the violets.

“ That'll take some stamps,” ventured Earl Kent, forgetting his colour.

“ And you, Early, me boy, won't be able to buy stamps,” said Georgette excusingly, as she focussed her glance upon his verdant tweeds, “ till you've paid for all that spinach. Stand out of the sun You make me blink.”

“ Aw, Judy ! ” he pleaded, but slunk with his greens into the mellowing shade.

“ All aboard ! ” was here called, and Georgette's escorting party all began talking one on top of the other, and crowding tiptoe to the rail to kiss her, the men as declaratively as the women.

The creeping of the wheels upon the rails electrified each one into a parting witticism.

“ Scene One of the great play, Georgette's Gyrations : She Sets Search for Sanity ! ” megaphoned Brice.

“ Take your claws off the Farmhouse Limited, Harve,” in nervous warning from Miss Mensing.

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"Bon voyage, madame!"

"Good-bye, Miss Verlaine; you've been always white to me!"

"My heart goes with you, George." This from La Farge, who was already sweeping, dusting, and garnishing his heart for the next occupant.

"Da, da! Judgy! Po' de' Judgy!"

As the train moved off, Georgette stood up in all the radiant prettiness of apparent strength and health, flinging kisses to them, and calling out in musical quotations:

"'Give my regards to Broadway! Remember me to Herald Square!'"

"Take our love to 'Horry'!"

"Also 'Rache'!"

"Not forgetting Vaporine and Cottolene!"

When they were too far to see whether she were well or ill, Georgette turned in a blind attempt to get within the car before she would fall. Its closeness crushed her like a tumbling wall, and as she swayed off into unconsciousness she felt herself caught and protected, and she knew, through the spirit, being in the depths of her swoon, whose were the arms which carried her to her seat.

"Just like you to be up your own sleeve all the time, John," she murmured in fragmentary, dead speech. "Kind of Jack-in-the-box. Or Johnny-on-

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the-spot. I'm so glad. Keep me—alive—won't—you——? ”

Sitting beside her, guarding her illness from publicity, Congdon did what he could to help, fanning her, taking the tight little grey gloves from her hands, letting the reviving air blow in from the window. As soon as she sighingly came back to life, he moved from her side to the seat facing her, upon which were piled the gifts of her friends. He sorted these deliberately, and with matter-of-fact decision threw out of the window those of which he disapproved.

“ Don't ! ” was her first conscious word, as some hot-house tuberoses hurtled into the scenery. “ You are an incarnate meddler.”

“ Thank you.”

A softer expression crossed her face.

“ It *is* good of you to be here. Where were you all the time ? ”

“ You mean while those apes and calves and puppies were kissing you good-bye ? ” He classified them without the least rancour.

“ There were one or two cats in the menagerie, too,” she said coldly.

“ I was here in the car waiting for just what happened ; for you to use up your nerve force making a suitable final impression.”

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"Final? Will I go into a faint for keeps some day?" she asked listlessly.

"Not now that you have done the sensible thing for once. But be prepared for being apparently worse the moment you get into the quiet of the country. It will be an unscrewing of the strings. When they are ready they will tighten up of themselves and be tuneful. Nor are you going insane. Take that out of your head. I said you might if you kept the pace. And you might. It's an infernal life you lead; a life of flightiness, froth, and flather."

"Oh, F, F, F!" she said rebelliously. "Fiddlesticks, Fritters, and French Fried Flummery! How you love to gibe at my profession!"

"I am gibing only at the way you take it."

She put up her fancily shod toe and disdainfully administered a prod to a man's rough sweater which was among her things.

"You may hurl that after the tuberoses. It's not mine."

"Yes, it is. It was mine. I brought it for you to wear when you ride down to Crooning Water. The place is cold. It is not New York."

"No?" she asked, arching her brows as if incredulous. Then, with aggravating inconsequence, "So glad you don't mind riding backward. It's just lovely to sit and look at you."

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"Have you definite ideas of how you get to Crooning Water?"

"A few."

"What are they?" With his arms folded across his big chest, he kept his calmly helpful eyes upon her and tutored patiently along.

"That's right, John; steady the idiot's wits," she praised. "Why, my ideas were these: I sort of thought," sarcastically, "I'd travel ahead to Crooning Water and then get off."

"Nothing of the sort. The station stop is Creston. Remember it."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Certainly not. I bought my ticket merely to the first stop. We are slowing down for it now."

"Why so glad to leave? Don't you like my manner?"

His keen glance, refusing to reflect the laughing brightness in hers, appeared to be seriously considering her question.

"No," he said at length, "I think I do not like you at all."

She gave a twist of lazy enjoyment. "Then why are you kind?"

Again he gave careful thought, answering slowly:

"Many of us may not like the manner of certain

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children, yet we are kind to them because they *are* children. Somebody must be kind to you, Georgette."

"The puppies are kind," she reminded him, "and the apes especially."

He at once stood up in the aisle. "Good-bye, Georgette." He bent his head to hers.

"Why," she said, in an affected, childish treble, "I twuly fink it's to be 'sooner'!"

"Anything but!" he exclaimed with sudden, rare anger.

His back was squared defiantly as he turned it upon her and strode down the aisle. The same vanishing back was all she saw on the platform when she looked from the window hoping to wave an ironic farewell.

"And that is the last well-tailored coat I am to see for four months," she sighed as she settled herself sleepily for her long ride. "So it's fortunate I was given a good look at it. The coats to come will be all home-grown."

On the whole, she stood the three-hour journey better than she had thought to do, interested, in spite of her predilection for artificial things, in the simple sweetness of the Delaware Valley; marvelling at the lush newness of the tints of spring—spring which had already become an old story in

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New York, but was here at its birth again ; admiring the brave majesty of the pine slopes into which the labouring, panting train mounted ; and catching her breath with a pleasure that was as swift and haunting as pain when a rift in the mountains disclosed far valleys beneath, with here and there lonely houses, mystically low-lying and distant, wrapped in a haze of isolation, like houses in a dream.

As late afternoon drew on, the chill in the air became freshly manifest, accentuating her sense of separation, and taking some of the farce out of John Congdon's sweater, which ugly article she eyed with lessening disfavour.

"Do you mean to say I miss the beast ? " she asked it.

Then at last the brakeman, who had been periodically lurching through the car with some mumbled, sulky, begrudging admissions about the stations, came along with something of the same hidden sort about Creston.

"The end of the beginning," said Georgette, chummily playing melodrama with herself. "What am I to do, conductor, about this department store ? " she asked, waylaying that official and calling his attention to her compartment full of belongings.

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Having been patently smitten with her from the start, he took her and them in charge, landing all safely on the platform. Georgette was the only passenger to alight, and it seemed to her as though the locomotive, panting on a curve, had turned its head surlily around to puff reproaches at her for the delay.

It soon chortled from sight, leaving her uprising high and dry from the billowy possessions at her feet, feeling, as one always does feel at a country station, as if her conspicuousness made her a striking claimant for assistance, and finding, of course, that nobody else in that part of the world held the same opinion. The station-master and his helpers worked busily over the freight, making a point of failing utterly to see her, though she could hardly have been more noticeable, such was her silken-grey loveliness, had she been in spangles and pink wings.

She sized up her rural environment and found it quite as bad as she had dreaded. Creston was simply a big wooden station on one side of a track with a big wooden inn on the other. Absolutely nothing else was in sight, except a forgotten-looking store which was clinging wretchedly to the side of a mountain, as if it had climbed up there in a fit of delirium to scan the valley for customers, and after the shock of not finding them had never been strong enough to let go and climb down again.

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Done at once and for ever with the scenery, Georgette hailed the station-master on his fifteenth run past her, and secured him.

"How am I to reach Crooning Water?" she asked.

His combination of shirt-sleeves and new Derby hat gave him an air of business-like thrift which his character did not belie, for he looked down at her shoes, rapidly determined their unwalkable quality, and then said at once, "Why, lady, I don't know." His amiable tone was more disheartening than any roughness, for it added, conclusively: "I'm completely finished. It's your turn now."

"Can I hire a carriage anywhere?"

The station-master looked carefully all over the sky as if scanning the condition of the heavenly livery stables; then, finding the stalls empty, said:

"Well, no; you can't."

Here the porter broke in, talking to no one in particular.

"The cart from Crooning Water's tied up back of the tank."

"That so?" asked the station-master, answering himself genially, "Why, sure. Here's the man now."

Georgette looked, and saw lounging rather con-

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sciously towards her an individual in overalls and a shirt so staunchly striped that it glared like a porch awning.

"Wonder where they find that hideous cloth?" she mused. "If I wanted some to dress a character part, I'd have to chase all over New York for it, and then come home without it."

"Are you the man from Crooning Water?" she demanded.

"Yes." To make admissions with extreme reluctance was a country trait, so it seemed.

"Mannerless cub," said Georgette to herself. Aloud, "Were you sent to bring me over?"

"Are you Miss Verlaine?"

"Yes," she said dryly. "The multitude made you uncertain, I suppose."

"I suppose," assented the man.

"And these are my things," she said, pointedly indicating her wilted bouquets, boxes of candy, magazines, silvered suit-case, pearl-tipped umbrella, and Congdon's sweater spread protectingly over all like a horse-blanket.

The man from Crooning Water could do no less than look at them. He certainly did no more, except to look away again.

"What law prevents your picking them up?" rapped Georgette, at the end of patience.

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"No law," was his response. He loaded himself incongruously with her gay affairs and carried them away. Presently, with comfortable creaks, the farm wagon drove up and stopped. Her man jumped from its seat and waited.

"Well, I can't and won't get into a tumbrel like that!" she denounced.

At this the man leaned restfully against a wheel, as if to show that the predicament having been made by her was hers to issue from. What was his was the leisure: so he took it.

"Is this the Dornblazer idea of transportation, or yours?" she queried.

"We thought you would have a trunk."

"I have," was her tardy remembrance. She handed him the check.

He lounged easily off, and in a moment came lounging as easily back with her baggage on top of him. This he slid thumplessly into the wagon.

"Here," she said, tendering fifty cents. The performance had been a choicely careful one.

He put out his hand to take the coin, but, just short of touching it, inquired:

"What for?"

"That," she explained, pointing out the trunk. He withdrew his hand.

"There was no charge on it," he observed.

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"No steam laundry and no tips. This may be heaven and this may be hell," thought Georgette. Then, aloud, tentatively eyeing the high wagon-seat, "How does a creature who is neither monkey nor man get up there?"

"She puts her foot upon the spokes, then the hub, and then the tyre," said the man, going to the horses' heads.

Following these plain but unassisted directions, Georgette managed to attain her shaky perch, and, as they started on their slow crawl down the mountain-side into the valley, even took pleasure in its forward prominence, which gave her an interested sensation of participating in the plunging freaks of the road. For a time she admired the wild beauty of the descent, now through dense forests of pine and chestnut, now over open spaces fringed with flowering laurel, until she realised that Creston, all barren though it was, nevertheless typified gay civilisation, and that every step into the valley was a step towards loneliness. She shivered, and held Congdon's sweater to her face, not for its warmth but for its suggestion of comradeship.

"Smells manny," she mused, sniffing critically without much admiration. "Shaving soap? No. Real leather? No. Mere man, I guess."

She leaned her cheek against it and shivered again

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What sort of person must this Dornblazer be to choose to live in such desolation? His wagon was abominable, his man worse, but his horses were flawless. Georgette knew good horses. A caprice struck her.

"I'll drive," she announced. "Give me the reins." To that tone in her voice a prince had been known to be obedient.

The man drove on, not even turning his head.

"No," he said. "These horses are not as safe as they look. They have to be managed."

She took pains to be mute from then on. After creaking still steadily downward for the greater part of an hour, they turned from the high road into a private lane, through whose trees a spiral of blue smoke showed.

"Rache getting supper," thought Georgette hopefully.

"We've been an hour going three miles," she said sarcastically to the man with the reins. "How long would these fiery untamed steeds have taken had they *not* been 'managed'? Fourteen hours?"

"Fourteen minutes," said the man trenchantly. "Which is what I've been guarding against."

Here the house came of a sudden into full view, set in a bower of apple trees, some of which still showed pink boughs of blossom. It was unpainted,

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evidently not through neglect but by design, so that it should nestle unstartlingly against its leafy background.

"This is Crooning Water," said the man, the first spark of life in his tones. "It takes people some time to like the house. For it has a kind of rambling tendency."

"Which it had better restrain," commented Georgette. "If it rambles a hair's-breadth, even in its dreams, it will tumble flat."

Nor was her criticism unfounded, for the later additions to the primitive old nucleus of mud and stone were none too adaptive, each new portion taking an independent angle of its own, so that the unifying porch had to perambulate around corners and up and down steps in order to preserve its continuity. And yet the whole spelled, mystically, Home.

Standing expectantly on this porch were two fashionably dressed little tots of girls—cut very much on the same pattern, like paper dolls—and a sun-bonneted, gingham-clad young woman, whose rounded arm lightly held a heavy but spick-and-span baby, a regular prize-winner for plumpness and fairness, a baby of such well-poised deportment that every nod of its head was kingly. Of the little girls, one was perhaps five years old, the other

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three, and both were sturdy and handsome. Each little head was top-knotted with a generous bow of ribbon, and each was held with a free-and-easy upward tilt which was less pert than innately aristocratic. The family quartette was arranged in formidable welcome.

Georgette's driver vaulted down and held the horses, leaving her to dismount by herself.

Seeing this, the young woman said, "Hold Homer, Pauline," and dumped the extinguishing baby of one year into the motherly arms of the baby of five, who clasped it capably. Then she ran out to the wagon and offered Georgette her hand, the whitest, firmest, shapeliest hand in the world.

"Let me help you, Miss Verlaine. I am Rachel Dornblazer."

"Ammunt," promptly contradicted the three-year-old, a trifle indignantly. "You's Marma."

"And who are you?" asked Georgette, after shaking hands with her hostess. She was agog to learn the second "ine."

But the child buttoned up its full red lips and was demurely, dazzlingly silent, its conversational powers being chiefly confined to contradiction.

"That is Rosine," smiled the mother. She looked at her three children contentedly, as well she might. Her loving pride in them had caused her to array

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them exhibitionally in their best ; she herself had not had time even to slip off the ample apron which she wore. Yet apron, gingham dress, sun-bonnet, all failed to dim Rachel Dornblazer's serene beauty. Hazel-eyed, creamy-fleshed, full-bosomed, she vied with the fruiting apple trees in fresh, natural, generous charm. And her voice was vital, deep, and beautiful too.

"Come right to your room, Miss Verlaine," she said. "You look tired. Horace always takes so long to drive a person down from the station, they get here all wearied out."

So it had been Horace ! Georgette turned around and gave him a steady look, the first she had really given him, for, though she could appreciate the good points of a man in uniform, even in livery, she literally and truly had never before had eyes for anything in overalls.

Horace accepted her gaze as an introduction, and gravely lifted his hat, as if he had that moment met her. The face which composedly took her accusing scrutiny was lean, clear-cut, of a fine baffling type, and strikingly good-looking, assertively so. There was never any escaping its reserved, dominant handsomeness.

"I am afraid I was rude," she said, though not apologetically. Horace Dornblazer's autocratic

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attitude of mind during the ride down she could have amusedly stood from an equal only. And that an equal could wear overalls she was not ready to admit. "I wonder what you must have thought of me!"

"Why, nothing," said Horace Dornblazer courteously.

And as she followed Rachel into the house, the words echoed in her ears, and echoed maddeningly, shorn of all their courtesy.

CHAPTER III

GEORGETTE looked around her new room in a state of mind bordering upon horror. That everything was clean and sweet, that the apartment had all the rural points of excellence which go to make up a "guest" room, at first escaped her observation. But the oddities did not. A rug crocheted of rags into an extremely lop-sided oval occupied the spot on the bare floor beside the bed where a person was supposed to kneel and pray. The ceiling was low enough to be touched if one stood on tiptoe ; and careening around below it, bumping its back every now and then, flew a hump-shouldered, droning bee, which seemed to be wholly at home, showing none of the hissing excitement of a bee who wants earnestly to be elsewhere. The four windows were so low that one who was standing would have to stoop to look out, and they were curtained with starched white muslin affairs like ladies' skirts. Closet there was none, and bearing stern witness to this fact was a long wooden shelf, punctured with iron clothes-hooks, and discreetly swathed in flowing cretonne draperies, most hideously flowered. The table was a solid set-out, like a picnic board,

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and was palpably home-made. It held a kerosene lamp whose glass base arose from the frothy red woollen billows of a knitted mat. On the wall over the table was a fret-sawn bracket-shelf on which rested a Bible and a candlestick, freshly stuck with a new candle. The only other mural decoration was a "plaque," made of a sort of pie-plate which had been faithfully gummed all over with cancelled postage stamps, and then varnished. The bed was "dressed" with great care, and looked as white as marble and about as downy; and the pillow stood up straight and stiff as a tombstone, supporting on its public side a starched "sham" which had gone inordinately to ruffles. Commercial washstand there was none either, its place being taken by a three-angled pine shelf nailed into one corner of the room, covered with figured oil-cloth, supporting a pitcher and bowl, and elegantly hung with a piece of the hideous cretonne out of which the "clothes-press" was made. Three long fingers of wood, hinged and nailed to the shelf, held clean towels. The soap spoke a good word for itself. It was pure, unscented Castile.

"Cut off from a bar of the baby's, I warrant me," frowned Georgette, putting it down after vainly trying to get a smell from it. She was given to violet-scented soaps.

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The room, besides being large, airy, sweet, and clean, had two other beauties—one was the fact that it was held in the green outside embrace of two huge mulberry trees, the friendly branches of which tapped at the very window-panes; and the other fact was a big bouquet of lilac flowers which spread fragrantly from the bureau. Not the lilacs, but the bureau, caught Georgette's displeased eye.

"It was Mrs. Noah's," she said. Age was certainly its failing, but it had been dubiously rejuvenated with yellow paint, and somebody, doubtless the artist who had stamped the plaque, had decorated it with enormous blowzy flowers cut from a florist's catalogue. Its mirror was the smallest thing conceivable to the mind of woman, only big enough to reflect a face; so that, when one stood in front of it, the ramshackle yellow monster seemed to sport a human head.

"And where do I put my hat?" shivered Georgette, holding the feathered grey cartwheel in her hand, and gazing hopelessly around her,

"You stand that up, on its rim, a-top of the shelf," answered Pauline respectfully from the doorway, where she quietly appeared, Rosine in her wake.

"Don't, either," said Rosine pleasantly.

"Marma sent me up to say 'at supper's on the table,'" continued Pauline.

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" 'Tisn't ! " murmured Rosine. Exact truth was evidently her strong point.

Pauline patiently explained. " Rosine, some's on the stove hotting, where it has to be. The rest is on the table."

Having an innately peaceful disposition quite at variance with her style of speech, Rosine let this statement pass unchallenged.

Pauline, struck with the new arrival's gorgeous head of hair, walked once deliberately all around her, surveying it from sides and rear.

" *I* think you're pretty," she concluded, the emphasis plainly showing that somebody downstairs did not.

" So Marma doesn't like me ? " asked Georgette shrewdly, as she thought. She whirled her hat to the bed.

" Yes, Marma does. She said, ' Isn't she a pretty girl ? ' and Dadda said, ' She's too old for girl,' and Marma said, ' She's still young, Horace, but she's sick.' Are you sick ? "

" Yes," said Georgette, studying herself in the glass. Too old ?

" How old is ' still young ' ? "

" About ten years too much."

" Are you ten years too much, Miss Verlaine ? "

" Not when I can help it." She poured some

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toilet water into her palm, freshened her face with it, and then powdered lavishly. "Take me to supper," she said, offering a hand to both children.

Rosine clutched at once, but Pauline asked curiously :

"Are you going downstairs floured, Miss Verlaine?"

"It seems not," said Georgette, whisking impatiently at her face.

Pauline heaved a satisfied sigh. "I thought you weren't."

The supper was an astonishment to Georgette ; she never knew there were so many things that she could not eat. There was a dish of radishes, a dish of spring onions, a dish of clabbered sour milk, a dish of stewed rhubarb, a plate full of fried eggs, a towering stack of hot biscuits, a tray piled with thick slabs of gingerbread, and plenty of weak tea. These viands disappeared very heartily, but without any assistance from her.

"Mrs. Dusenberry said," narrated Pauline—and this was Georgette's first introduction to a character of much importance to Pauline—"at once there was a girl who always quarrelled with her victuals, but Mrs. Dusenberry says 'wittles,' and this girl got thinner and thinner and thinner, till you could see a barn through her, and a strong wind blew her away one day, and she died."

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"Eat your supper, Pauline," advised Rachel gently.

Pauline ducked her head over her plate. "And the crows picked her bones," she informed it firmly.

"Didn't," commented Rosine.

"Have some cake, Rosine," advised Rachel, still gently.

Rachel was evidently no believer in "don'ts"; she always switched a delinquent on to a new track instead.

Rachel in a sun-bonnet was comely enough, but Rachel without it, sitting at the head of her table and mothering her children, was beautiful.

Homer graced the board with his elders, wobbling decorously in a high-chair and gnawing a biscuit. His varied emotions occasionally made him quiver, and occasionally caused him to break out in a wide, silent smile, but never, never made him audible.

There was evidently no maid of any description, for when plates were to be changed, it was miniature Pauline who changed them, moving capably around the table, its height all but extinguishing her, so that her top-knot of ribbon seemed to crawl around the edge all of itself like a butterfly, her small hand appearing at the right intervals and safely clutching a plate into invisibility.

Horace, still in the overalls and the porch awning,

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sat opposite Rachel and out-Homered Homer when it came to taciturnity, contributing neither quiver nor smile to the entire proceedings. Yet there was an alertness and dignity about his personality which made him an exceedingly alive figure.

"Come upstairs, Miss Verlaine," Rachel said suddenly. "Horace, see that the children finish their supper properly."

"No," stammered Georgette vaguely. "No."

"Come upstairs," repeated Rachel firmly. "Lean on me. It is just a short little climb. I can almost lift you. Now you are in your own room. Lie right down. I am here. Don't be frightened."

While drifting away in the swoon which Rachel had foreseen—one of the world's mothers was Rachel—Georgette said clearly :

"I can make that St. Anthony in overalls—sit up and take notice—and I'm going—to do it."

"What is it, you poor, pretty child?" asked Rachel.

But she got no response. So she quickly gave what little help was to be given, and then methodically set to work tidying up the room, putting away the scattered hat and coat and sweater, and deftly emptying the contents of the suit-case into the bureau drawers.

"Lie still, don't talk, and let me undress you,"

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were her quiet directions when she saw the girl on the bed sigh and move.

"I know better than this," commented Georgette apologetically, while letting her hostess pull out hairpins and pins.

Rachel went carefully through drawers and suitcase, looking for a nightgown. Not finding the object of her search, she left the room and came back with one of her own.

"What's that wonder?" inquired Georgette, sitting up completely revived.

The garment was of stout muslin with a double-lined yoke, a double-lined rolling collar as big as a sausage, and long, baggy sleeves finished off with a durable cuff. Written on the yoke in indelible ink was the legend, "Rachel D. No. 5." The robe was meant to last.

"Remove it," ordered Georgette positively. "If I should die in the night and go up to St. Peter in *that*, it would take a month of Sundays to explain."

"I did not want to bother you for your trunk key," said Rachel, "and you have no gown in your grip."

Georgette wandered over to the bureau, and took out a filmy whiff of white silk, heavy with fine lace and odorous with violet sachet. The whole thing would have slipped through a napkin ring.

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"Why tell stories?" she asked gravely, waving this trophy.

"Do you sleep in that?" asked Rachel, awed. "I thought it was a princess slip, for a party dress." Then, with quick feminine delight, "Oh, do put it on and let me see you!"

She sat impulsively down on the floor, merely a girl, in spite of her three children, and hugged her gingham knees, her stout leather shoes very much in evidence, as she watched Georgette's disrobing act. Her serious face was shining with interest.

"I've heard of silk nightgowns," she said quaintly.

"I'll give you some of mine," was Georgette's ready offer.

"Oh, no!" cried Rachel, crimsoning visibly. And Georgette divined that the blush was for the gown's short sleeve and open neck.

Rather weary of the whole situation she flung herself down upon the bed, her face hidden in the pillow, her wealth of hair lying across her in heavy strands.

"You are worn out, so I'll read to-night," said Rachel, getting up and reaching down the Bible. Kneeling by the bedside, the book open upon the coverlet, she began to read words that Georgette had not heard since childhood, and none too often even then.

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“Stop!” said Georgette abruptly, raising a startled face. “I simply can’t bear it.”

Downstairs, after she had undressed the children and put them to bed, and had cleared the supper-table, and had laid her kindling in the kitchen stove for morning, Rachel came into the room where Horace sat at his nightly reading—rather an unusual visit for her.

“She’s nice, isn’t she?” she asked, leaning her head against the wall, and yawning.

From among kings and queens, long and graciously dead, of early French history, Horace came back but reluctantly to the present. His eyes, dreamy yet passionate, filled with the pageantry and tragedy of the past, gazed at Rachel for a while; then he said shortly, too shortly a fine observer would have thought:

“Oh, *her*. To be honest, Rache, I think she is not ‘nice’ in the least.”

“Why, Horry!” exclaimed Rachel, yet as tolerant of this defection even as any woman is tolerant when her husband does *not* like some charming sister woman. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, for one thing, I fancy she is coarse.” To anyone who cared to notice, it was evident Horace had been putting thought upon the woman who was not nice.

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"Coarse! Horry! She is as delicate as a sprig of heliotrope."

"And she plainly does not like children."

"There you are quite wrong, Horry; she has hardly taken her eyes off ours."

"To be amused at children's antics is not liking them. But we ought not to discuss her. Rache, you are so tired, would it not rest you if I read to you a little?"

"Well——" she said dubiously. Then, with magnanimous self-denial, "All right, Horry." And she settled her head more restfully back against the wall, her eyes closing.

Awake to the finger-tips, suffering and exulting with the France who resisted the Louis who was "the state," Horace read several pages with rapid clearness. At a crisis in the heroic struggle he lifted glowing eyes to Rachel, to win from her a word of living interest.

He got it.

"Horry—let me interrupt you, dear—did you feed the little pigs?"

"Don't I always?" he asked, a trifle bewildered.

"Yes; but I was upstairs to-night, and wasn't sure. I couldn't go to bed thinking the little things were hungry. What you read was lovely. Thank you."

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Seeing that she was done, if he was not, he slowly pushed the book aside. Rachel rose with alacrity.

"She has the most beautiful stockings, Horry," she contributed, going back to her guest, whose breakfast was on her mind, "with hand-embroidered flowers on them. And the wonderfulest underclothes! like the trousseaux that you read about in the papers. And, Horry, I wish you could see the nightgown; it is silk, and has short sleeves and ribbons and lace as if it was a party dress."

"Rache!" he cried in annoyed protest, "I don't think you ought—I sometimes wish, Rache, that you——" He killed both sentences of unkind criticism at their birth, and rose abruptly, holding the lamp to light her upstairs. "I know you are worn out, Rache. Good night."

"Good night, Horry." Rachel had almost gained her room when she called softly, "Horry!"

"Yes?"

"Don't walk through the hall in your boots to-morrow; you get up so early; and I want her to sleep."

Which is exactly what Georgette did. The balm-laden air of the mountains folded her quietly as in soft wings of healing, so that she never heard the far-off panting of the trains as they journeyed all night through the gorges, never heard the evening

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whip-poor-will crying from the orchard, never heard the tree-fights of the squirrels at dawn, never heard the cheerful thrush in the new of the morning. When she awoke and consulted her watch, she saw she had neglected to wind it, and it had stopped.

"And there's no telling if it's the overture on or the last act," she murmured, dressing.

Going downstairs, she found that Pauline and Rosine had evidently been baited and set like traps to catch her, for on her appearance in the dining-room Pauline ran to an outer door and announced to someone in space :

"She's up !"

Rosine's short legs followed suit, but her announcement was :

"Sh'isn't ! She's down."

Then both of them came back politely and said "Good morning." They were as prettily flouncy and stylish in their calico as in their white lawn of the night before, and so fat were their legs and so brief were their skirts and so fashionably sawn off was their hair that they looked like illustrations for a Christmas magazine.

When she got downstairs, Rachel hurried in and began setting out the second breakfast. Using the tail of her eye, Georgette was pained unspeakably to see the onions, the lettuce, the radishes, the

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clabber, the rhubarb, the fried eggs, and the biscuits all making a *matinée* reappearance. Seating herself in lonely state at the table, she bestowed her devotion upon the coffee and a frilly kind of pancake. Rachel fried them in the adjoining kitchen, and Pauline staggered precariously in with them.

After the third stagger Pauline stopped, rubbed her small brow and narrated educationally :

"Mrs. Dusenberry knew a boy, she did, who gorged fritters and gorged fritters and gorged fritters till every button he had hit the ceiling. And then the boy 'sploded too. And he died."

"Pauline," came wafting gently from Rachel, "see what Homer is doing."

"Oh, just a-sitting, I guess," hazarded Pauline safely. But she went to see.

Georgette found her on the porch with the sedentary Homer, who gave her at once one of his wide, silent smiles. There was a mournful dog on the porch, too, an animal that kept its dejected nose in its listless paws by the hour together, showing no signs of life unless Rachel came out and passed him ; then his loyal tail thumped twice.

"What's the name of the dizzy pup?" asked Georgette.

"Sport."

"I can't believe it. Tell me again."

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“ *Sport !* ”

“ No use. I can’t believe it yet,” said Georgette severely. “ I’ll have to go and think it over.”

A hammock under the apple trees had caught her eye, and seemed to beckon to her. And she pretty well kept to it for several days. The adults mercifully let her alone, and the little ones more mercifully, perhaps, kept running to her for snatches of talk.

Lying with closed eyes she would sense the approach of Pauline. Very long and very excitable silence. Then, whisperingly, would come : “ Miss Verlaine, are you asleep ? ”

“ Nay, nay, Pauline,” Georgette would say, her eyes still shut. “ But what would have happened if I’d said I *was* asleep ? ’

“ Why, then I’d have went away and letted you stay asleep.”

“ Get at it, Pauline, whatever it is.”

And once it was :

“ Why-er, why-er, do you like aspaddergrass ? ”

Correctly construing this into asparagus, Georgette answered :

“ Don’t I just ! ”

“ Well, I don’t ; not when it’s soft and goo-ie, and I have to shoo it all around my plate with a fork. We are going to have it for dinner.”

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"Once there was a little boy, no, a little elephant," narrated Georgette, in a high, sing-songy, tantalising imitation of Pauline herself, "who fed and fed and fed on asparagus. And one day it got a piece up its trunk, not a goo-ie piece, of course, and it choked to death. And it died."

"That so?" asked Pauline, deeply impressed. "Rosine, come here."

Then there came a pattering over the grass, indicative of Rosine's approaching small feet, then a thump, indicative of Rosine's solidly expectant subsidence upon the ground.

"Rosine, this is sad," Pauline commenced. "Once there was a neffalunt, and that's a wild beast as big as our carriage-shed, and this neffalunt ate and ate and ate aspaddergrass. Till one day it stuffed an ungoo-ie piece up its trunk (and that's its snaky nose) and the neffalunt choked to death."

Pauline waited for the ghastly significance of this to sink into Rosine's mind. Then she remorselessly proceeded to kill the elephant. "And it died."

During the intake of one tragic breath Rosine was subdued. But immediately rallying, she called out her reserve.

"Didn't," she observed calmly, and saved the elephant.

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When it was Rosine by herself who came to investigate the apparent sleeper in the hammock proceedings differed: Rosine gently used her tiny pink fingers to gouge open Georgette's eyes. That done:

"Tell me a 'tory."

"A story? Oh, I couldn't."

"Yes, you cudden."

"No, I couldn't."

"Yes, you cudden."

"No, I couldn't."

"Yes, you cudden."

And this would placidly keep up for eternities. Then Georgette would make a change of attack.

"You tell *me* a story."

"Couldn't."

"Cudden."

"Couldn't."

"Cudden."

Sometimes it seemed to Georgette as if whole drowsy hours went by during the "couldn'ts" and "cuddens": often she would drop really to sleep in the amiable middle of them, waking later to find Rachel by her with a cup of hot milk and some toast—for when it was seen that the family spread hardly appealed to her, she was permitted

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to doze her way back to strength in the hammock, the apple boughs brushing her, and was not expected to drag herself to the table.

Occasionally Sport came down, too, to find out what was going on, walking with slow and dejected stiffness, showing languid aversion to the whole interpolation, but when there, sinking with a heart-breaking sigh into the grass, and straightway going contentedly to apparent death.

"The newest and best hybrid," is what Georgette called him, "a Sportless Sport."

Nor was Homer unknown in the apple bower. Then "Clean Cocoon" was his new name—clean, for reason obvious; cocoon, because of his silent habit of squirming pleasantly when poked. Pauline often wheeled the Clean Cocoon down in his chair-cart, and he would sit by the hammock reaching towards Georgette's down-swinging dress in a shiver of delight, sometimes clenching his dumpling fists and shaking them, sometimes curling his anguished toes and kicking them, when affairs went unsatisfactorily, but never, never crying.

"Mrs. Dornblazer," asked Georgette, one of the milk-and-toast times, "when do you take the muzzle off this baby? I never hear him. Doesn't he say 'Goo!' or 'Gar!' or 'Wack!' or 'What the devil!' or anything?"

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"Miss Verlaine, *please!*" prayed Rachel, glancing at her little girls.

"I'll be everlastingly careful," promised Georgette. "Sure, Mrs.— Oh, I hate to say it. It's such a mouthful."

"Call me Rache. I wouldn't mind."

"I would. Sounds so like roach," mourned Georgette.

"My mother used to call me Ray," said Rachel, with the reminiscent wistfulness of one who sees a grave at the end of the thought.

"Ray's better. Ray, look at what I've taught the Cocoon. Pauline, bring him here."

The capable Pauline unstrapped Homer from his chair, and puffingly dumped him on Georgette's chest as she swung in the hammock.

Homer's head, as it nodded in a bar of sunshine, showed a tuft of white fuzz for hair. In the shade he could pass for bald.

"Now, then," warned Georgette, like a pedagogue. "Attention! Cocoon, point to your raven locks!"

And the Clean Cocoon, concentrating all his baby powers, waggled his pointing forefinger up and up till it triumphantly signalled out the albino tuft.

Shrieks of adoring laughter greeted this magnificent feat.

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"He's not done yet," promised Georgette. "Now, then, baby! Show us how great Homer nods."

And ponderously, as if a millstone were weighing him down, Homer bent his head to his ankles.

"Horry!" cried Rachel excitedly, waylaying him as he was about to enter the house. "Do come here and see what Homer does!"

As he none too eagerly approached, Horace's free stride changed to a palpably conscious one. Slightly touching his hat in greeting, he leaned aloof against a tree-trunk, as if emphasising the fact that he was no party to his own appearance.

Georgette was covertly, if viciously, pleased to see him, for she knew she made an acceptable sight. The unflattering mirror of Mrs. Noah's bureau had not been able to withhold the fact that youth and freshness were coming back to her face. And Georgette was a genius in a hammock, knowing to a nicety just how much of foot to show at one end, and how much of hair to display at the other. She quite rightly had no misgivings about her charming prettiness as she demurely put the Cocoon through his paces.

The "nodding of Great Homer" struck Horace's rather undeveloped streak of the ridiculous, and he broke into a sudden laugh, a spontaneous, satis-

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factory sound that caused Georgette to arch her eyebrows to herself.

"That's one in your favour," was her mental score. "You laugh like a gentleman."

Rachel laughed joyously too, but to her the "Homer" had a meaning restricted solely to the present, and the "nod" was shorn of all allusion.

"Isn't he the darling baby!" she cried. Then, nervously, "I smell my bread. Horry, bring Homer with you." And she sped to her oven.

When the visibly reluctant Horace stooped over the hammock to lift up Homer, Homer showed visible reluctance too. He smiled his wide, soundless smile, shivered ecstatically at the contrariness of the move he was contemplating, then grabbed two handfuls of Georgette's floating hair and buried his head in her neck.

Georgette, having a very good time, made no attempt to disentangle the baby's hands, nor to lift its coily burrowing head, leaving these duties to Horace. She lay in lazy, cool contentment, laughing lights in her eyes.

"You love children?" he hazarded, plainly less curious about the matter than eager to shift attention from himself.

"Why, no; can't say that I do," admitted

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Georgette genially, as the burrowing head ducked delightedly under her chin.

"They follow you everywhere," he persisted.

"Oh, yes ; that's my fate. All my life I've been followed by things I didn't love."

"I shouldn't call children 'things,' " he frowned, furious over his task of handling the satiny hair of the woman who was not nice.

"I should say not!" she cried virtuously. "Who would?"

The hair part settled, the harder matter of unburrowing the head was at hand. Horace redly temporised.

"The children tell me that you have named us all newly ; but they neglected to tell me *my* nickname. What have you invented for me?"

"Nothing," she said gently.

"No?" His tone was soft with friendliness to repay her for the gentle note in her own.

"No," still gently. "I don't *have* to. I couldn't invent anything funnier than 'Horry Dornblazer' if I sat up all night."

At her gurgle of irrepressibly sweet laughter, Homer nodded upright in investigation. He was promptly snatched from contamination by his father.

While on a stride to the house Horace turned for a moment.

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“ Miss Verlaine, why does it interest you to be rude to me ? ”

“ ‘ Interest me ! ’ ” she repudiated. “ You are mistaken. I never was less interested in my life.”

And to prove her words, she sleepily closed her eyes, as if quite unaware of the hot conflict which glittered in his own.

CHAPTER IV

"BY now I ought to be strong enough to be able to go to the table and look at the onions and clabber again," Georgette decided, critically approving of herself in Mrs. Noah's sample of mirror, exulting to see that the youthful roundness was coming back to her face.

She had spent the sultry May morning and forenoon in the hammock, making periodical forages in the grass for the long-stemmed violets which blossomed among it in wide purple patches, so that "hunt" was no word to use, no hunting being necessary—all one had to do was to fill one's hands till one was tired, then rest and go at it again.

"I'll wear some of these," she said, gazing artistically at the bunches on the table, "and make myself up for sixteen, or seventeen, to match."

She therefore parted her wonderful hair on one side, plaited it into a thick swinging rope, tied it with a black bow, put on a short-waisted white dress, and tucked a handful of violets loosely in her wide belt.

"Simple and girlish," she appraised, nodding

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pleasantly to what she could see of herself in the glass. "And prettier than you have ever been in your life, Georgette Verlaine. Probably comes of being able to say 'truly rural.' I wish John could see you. Lacking John, Horry will have to do. Question: Does Horry see you? Or doesn't he?"

Running downstairs she ingratiated herself into the kitchen, where Rachel was cooking, and, noting that the overalled Horace was there also, she acted up to her sixteen-year-old character, and leaned a little shyly against the door while she said:

"Will you let me come to the table to-night, Ray?"

"You are a dear girl," said Rachel, honestly glad of her recovered beauty and strength, and praising her for it as for an achievement. "I really must kiss you, Miss Verlaine."

She methodically set back a frying-pan before indulging in this emotional act, then wiped her beautiful hands on her apron. Her movements were always as accurate as if guided by perfect machinery, and she never showed flurry. Every suggestion of her full but supple body was comfortable, and she had a knack of looking cool in hot weather and warm in cold weather.

When she kissed her guest's fragrant cheek, Horace strode from the room by one of its various doors.

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"And I wonder why?" thought Georgette scientifically.

"Go out of the hot kitchen and on to the porch, Miss Verlaine," advised Rachel, whose calm eyes were a trifle "broody" over the supper menu. "And don't let the children worry you."

"Pauline," said Georgette, when outside, "you're not to worry me."

Pauline, flushed with the day's heaviness of heat, and panting with the exertion of wheeling Homer back and forth in his chair-cart, stopped midway in the passage, and gazed aghast at this message. Making use of the lull in his rapid transit, Homer swooped towards a basket of garden produce and clutched forth a green onion. So pleased was he with this success that his waving feet became quite hysterical. Then he forced the onion bulb into his mouth. At the same time Georgette pumped herself a mug of water and began to drink. Two painful duties stared poor little Pauline in the face at once.

"Mrs. Dusenberry said," she began on one, "'at there was a child who drank water from a pump **without** looking, she did, and she dranked down a baby snake, and the baby snake grew big and grew big and grew big, till it wiggled a great big snake out of the little girl's mouth again, and stuck there

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in the middle, its tongue forking out. And the little girl, she died."

"High time," commented Georgette.

"Homer," besought Pauline, vainly struggling to purloin his onion. "Homer, for *my* sake!" Homer held on to it for his own. "Mrs. Dusenberry knew a little boy about your age as chewed raw onions," recited Pauline, warning and desperate, "when he was begged not to chew raw onions, and—er—and his teeth all fell out."

Here Homer removed his onion plug and gave one of his vacuous, sudden smiles, disclosing his bare gums. Pauline studied them with gloomy recollection.

"But I guess yet you're safe," she admitted unwillingly.

"Mrs. Dusenberry must have had some interesting friends—while they lived," mused Georgette. "I'd like to meet the lady."

"You will," promised Pauline. "Now that you are better. We are going to have a gathering."

"A what?"

"Gathering."

"Isn't that something you have in your ear?"

"We have it in our parlour; and pass around pie and coffee."

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"I'll pass wide around the pie," promised Georgette. "Go and wheel your infant."

Georgette sat on the edge of the porch, her head against one of its posts, her knees lightly locked in her hands. And she stared with uneasy fascination at the changes in the sky, whose glorious sunset streaks were turning to livid and sinister glares. The sight filled her with premonitions which thrilled her away from fear rather than into it, and set loose all sorts of lawless daring in her thoughts. Nature was getting ready to go on a rampage and Georgette was alert to follow. Without looking around she heard Horace step across the porch, and then stand gazing, evidently impressed by the sky.

"Rache," he called. "Oh, Rache!" His voice, though hushed, was alive with elation, in it a throbbing note of keen joy which reached eagerly out to share and be shared with. "Come here and look at this!"

"Doesn't care a damn whether I see it or not," confided Georgette softly to her post.

From the kitchen Rachel's patient contralto floated out in a few words which gave him a fair chance to use his common sense and reconsider:

"I have my hands in the biscuit dough, Horry."

"This won't soil your hands, Rache. It's a sunset. Please come and look at it."

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With her hands rolled in her clean apron to protect them from nature, Rachel came out on the porch to take a wifely, rather than artistic, look at the sunset. She saw something else first, though.

"What have you got on your clothes for, Horry? Are you going anywhere?"

Georgette sneaked a glance around her post to find out what was meant by "your clothes." She saw that Horace had discarded his overalls and was in a decent suit, which was so unusual as to give him the air of being in full evening dress. She also saw that his face was severely unfavourable to the mention of "his clothes." He refused to hear it, and authoritatively waved towards the sunset.

"Isn't that wonderful?" he asked, struggling around for words in which to pin down the wonder of it. A subdued but palpitating kinship with the elements seemed to be awake in him as it was in Georgette. Unable to express this for himself, he seemed to plead with Rachel to interpret for him. "Do look at it." Placidly obedient, her eyes followed his direction. "See that bank of black—it might be a beautiful sort of purgatory, mightn't it, Rache? With those hot flitters of lightning breaking through. And those coppery streaks—why, there's no words to describe the loveliness of them, or the meaning."

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Rachel gazed conjugally. "It's lovely," she agreed, "and it means rain, and the attic windows will have to be shut. I'll go in now and do it."

Georgette rubbed her head sympathetically against the post.

Horace's immovable silence informing Rachel magnetically that she had not risen so high as he wanted her to, she said a bit meekly: "Someone must shut the attic windows when a rain's coming, Horace."

And she went into the house.

Georgette stood up, still leaning against her post, and turned half around. The sullen hot lights from the sky played over her white dress and lent a burnished fire to her hair. The recklessness of the lightning flickered in her eyes. In her the storm spirit was incarnate. Her glance claimed his, and held it.

"Thunder and lightning are on their way," she said quietly, as if to a dear friend who understood, "perhaps only noise and fireflash, and perhaps destruction and quick death—that's the unholy charm of it—you can't do anything but just wait and watch and take what comes. A person feels so very small for a while that nothing matters, and then after one realises that nothing matters, why, one doesn't feel small at all, but big and fearless—a kind of brother to the crashing storm. When one

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knows that one's roof may be blown into the next county in the next five minutes, and one's lifetime's home be blazing to ashes, one gets a little glint of disbelief in the stability of any thing, morals and manners and conventions along with the rest. That purgatory of yours over there in the sky, where the coppery streaks are, seems just writhing full of souls who somehow are happy with the mere excitement of suffering. And this—this pull that there is on the human heart before a storm breaks ”—she pressed her two nervous hands against her breast—“ *that is the message from Thor and Loki, asking : ‘ Who is my brother ? Who is brave and law-breaking enough to ride the storm with the gods ? Are you ? Are you ? ’ ”* As she asked her quoted, fanciful question, Horace, who had stepped nearer and nearer to her during her low-voiced speech, drawn by a blood-bond of rebellion against the inertia of the commonplace, his mobile face quickening with a thousand replies, was just saved from the banality of saying “ *Yes* ” by the hint of the coming mockery with which she ended. “ *And what a ride it would be for some of us—always granted that we didn’t have to go back and put our attic windows down.*”

The comradeship and interest died from his face, and he looked over with his old disapproval.

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"You do not understand Rachel yet," he said, making the huge mistake of considering her remark from its personal side. "Nobody appreciates her on a slight acquaintance. Her equilibrium, which really comes from a passionate sense of justice and love of order, looks something like coldness, and is apt to be taken that way by those who don't study deep enough into character. Rachel doesn't exalt herself over sunsets when there are people to be taken care of. She would never stay awake half the night to admire a fine moon, but she would stay awake *all* the night to look after you if you were sick. And what is more, Rachel is not one of the people who yawn next day, where you would be sure to see it, in order to remind you."

Georgette smiled winningly.

"When a man defends his wife to me, I always feel that we are getting on," she said in quite a grateful tone. Leaving him no time to digest this remark either well or ill, she continued: "It saves your muscles considerably to have such an equilibrist as Ray on the premises. In *my* house it would be you, not I, who would do the galloping up two flights of stairs to shut the rain out."

"To take care of the home is a woman's privilege as well as duty," he said, delivering the text firmly. "Moreover," he added, as if this were a logical

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sequence to the text, "in *your* house I would be absent."

"That's so," she replied, her eyes widely and trustfully open, as if she were looking to him for lovely and new truths. "That's really so."

He turned from her in rude impatience, and began fastening some shutters and awnings which rattled in ghostly obedience to flitting gusts of wind. The grass had changed from green to grey, and every now and then a dry leaf would leap up from it as if puffed violently from below. The trees were motionless except for some young cherries which dashed restlessly from side to side.

From the distance came sounding ponderous booms of thunder now and again, followed by lazy yawns of lightning over the far sky. Some minutes apart there fell drops of rain so big that they spread over the doorstone, each splash larger than a dollar. Little Pauline wheeled the Clean Cocoon into a sheltered corner and maternally gathered his toys, putting them where the coming rain could not injure them.

"And where's the Primeval Denial, Dadda?" she asked anxiously. And in response to his puzzled air explained: "That's what Miss Verlaine calls Rosine."

"I left her asleep in the hammock," remembered

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Georgette, flying out to bring her in. She scooped the baby from its depths, shaking her to awaken her. "Come into the house, Rosine; it's going to rain and you will get wet through."

"Won't," grunted Rosine, lolling on Georgette's shoulder. The nice smell that was there aroused her better than the threat of rain, and she raised her head to sniff carefully all around Georgette's neck till she located the spot where some violet perfume had been put. This spot she sleepily kissed.

"Kiss Number Two from the Dornblazer family," commented Georgette. "It's Pauline's turn next and then Horry's."

"Isn't," cooed Rosine, snuggling.

"Perhaps you're right, Rosine," pondered her carrier, "but we'll give him the chance."

The rain continued to hold off. Supper went through very creditably, and Georgette won honours by trying clabber and rhubarb. Rachel said no more about Horace's "clothes," but eyed them once in a while with unabated perplexity.

"If he has put 'his clothes' on for me, he shall not go unrewarded," Georgette promised herself, as she bit thoughtfully into a biscuit. "He's handsome as a horse, head in the air, snorting around for trouble, and all too ready to bolt if so much as a scrap of paper flies up."

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After the supper-dishes were cleared away, Rachel, instead of being wilted, as were all the others, by the sultriness, indefatigably drew pails of water, and proceeded to bathe the three children in the kitchen.

"It will freshen the little things and help them to sleep well," she said.

Georgette sat in a wooden chair and interestedly watched the proceedings. Horace was within sight through an open door, sitting in his study over his books. Pauline, peeled down to a tiny undershirt, was doing sprite-like steps.

"When I get on my nothing at all, it makes me feel so light I always want to dance," she explained.

"*Prenez garde*, Pauline," warned Georgette; "that's heading straight for the chorus."

"Oh, Miss Verlaine," objected Rachel.

"Ray," pronounced Georgette severely, "for an impure mind, commend me to a good mother."

Pauline whirled up to her and kissed her, pulling her down by the braid to reach her. "But I don't know why I did it," she confessed naïvely, "for I don't want anything and I haven't been bad."

"Number Three of the Dornblazer family," counted Georgette aloud. So many of her remarks were not understood by her listeners that she had fallen into the habit of putting her inmost thoughts into clearly audible speech.

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When taken out of his shell and placed in the tub, the Clean Cocoon showed a body as magnificently sculptured as a marble model, curved and dimpled and creased to perfection ; and Rachel held him in her beautiful bare arms, firm as a statue herself, but melting with mother tenderness. When she lifted the child from the water into a vast towel in her lap, she gave way to a quick frenzy of love, and laid her face rapturously against his warm flesh.

“ Oh, Miss Verlaine,” she asked, “ don’t you just adore little boys ? ”

“ Um ! So they say,” remarked Georgette non-committally.

“ I love them and pity them. Their feet have so far to go. And when I hear of some grown criminal being hanged, or some big man going wrong, I always think of him as a little baby, being loved—oh, years and years ago—in his mother’s lap, as Homer is in mine now ; and, thinking of him as a baby, I can feel sorry for him and forgive him. I always fancy there is a mother somewhere who remembers him in all his innocence and cunning ways. Sometimes when my little children vex me and I am on the point of saying something angry, I think of the hard road they have to travel, and I keep silent. Loving is better than scolding.”

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“ Well, I should say ! ” agreed Pauline, energetically patting her mother’s back in approbation.

“ Put on your nightie, Pauline.”

At that moment the storm broke : a clap of thunder, which shook the house, split deafeningly as if on the very roof-top ; a blaze of lightning leaped into the room ; and the rain poured from everywhere at once, a deluge of fury. The noise of the cataract, of the thunder and wind and thrashing trees, killed the talk for a while.

The children, awe-stricken and pale, clustered around their mother, and Horace moved restlessly from window to window, the dark casements of which framed now the night and now brilliant pictures of the orchard.

He came once to the door of the kitchen.

“ The rye is done for, Rache,” he said quietly.

“ Yes, that’s done for, Horry.”

He turned his back to his reading-table, but could not seem to read.

“ Why is the rye done for ? ” asked Georgette of Rachel.

“ There’s hail with this rain, and the rye will be too beaten down to cut.”

“ You take it easily—the rye you’ve been counting on for income ! ”

“ Taking it hard wouldn’t mend it.”

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Their voices sounded puny in the general uproar.

"Listen to it!" exulted Georgette. "It makes me want to smash things. I could shoot a bullet through the heart of the world. Hear that for a crash. The rain rattles like molten lead. It's Valkyrie music. I feel like Brunhilde. I *am* she!"

Throwing herself into the attitude of the goddess on her rock, Georgette sang the few lines that contain the repeated defiant war-cry. The bird-like scream rang around the room like the challenge that it was, and as if in response to the invocation came the musketry of the thunder and the quivering tongues of flame.

"Y-o-u s-t-o-p!" shrieked Pauline, breaking into nervous tears. Rosine followed suit, and Homer threatened to copy.

"Babies," said Rachel, "let's sing 'There's a light in the valley.'"

She began, and the two little girls eventually joined in.

"There's a light in the valley, there's a light in the valley,
There's a light in the valley for me.
And no evil shall I fear while my Shepherd is so near,
There's a light in the valley for me!"

"You bet the' is," said Pauline, peering bravely from the window and accepting a scaring flash calmly. She had sung herself dry and composed.

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Rosine chanced to look after the flash had gone.

"Th'isn't," she said shortly.

"This lightning will make it lovely for us to go upstairs to bed," said Rachel, gathering her night-gowned brood. "We'll be able to see without having to carry a lamp. Say good night to Dadda and Miss Verlaine."

And to the repeated strains of "There's a light in the valley" the quartette sang itself from sight.

Georgette sat awhile eyeing the tub of water. Then she walked deliberately to the door of Horace's study and inquired interestedly :

"Do you leave this tub for The Lady with the Equilibrium to cart away?"

"What do you mean?" He made no move.

"Nothing, apparently," admitted Georgette, strolling to the table. "What are you reading?"

"What do you want?" asked Horace, referring to her presence. He was plainly not rude, only genuinely puzzled.

"Want?" she echoed, looking around her with calm scrutiny. "Is this a room where a person must *want* something in order to be admitted?"

"Oh," said Horace shortly, seeing that the visitation was a visit. "Will you sit down?"

"'Willn't,'" observed Georgette briefly, wandering to the book-shelves and running through the

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first names she saw, "Browning, Shakespeare, Shaw, The Agriculturalist, Kipling, Oscar Wilde—gee!—Poultry Raising, Schopenhauer, How to Keep Hogs, Rossetti, Kant, Huxley, Gibbon, Macaulay—the old chestnut—Dickens, Book of Synonyms, Wallenstein, Idylls of the King, Exterminating the Potato Bug, and Diseases of the Cow! Nice catholic soul you seem to be."

"That should not be a reproach," he frowned.

"'Tisn't," quoted Georgette again, and the childishness of it seemed to aim a belittling blow at his powers of conversation.

"What do *you* read?" he ventured curtly.

"Horace."

He glanced at her sharply, but her face was immovable in its veracity and frankness.

"Miss Verlaine," he said slowly, "you are playing some game with me, and I am not clever enough to see what it is in order to play back properly. That amuses you a little, and you take me as a joke."

"Nothing as intricate as a joke," she denied kindly. To herself she thought: "He's enjoying this. No man wearies of discussing himself. I'd like to bet a trifle that I don't see the overalls again at the supper-table. He's rising to his 'clothes' nobly."

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“ ‘Nothing as intricate as a joke,’ ” he repeated carefully. “Do you mean anything by that?”

“No, thank God,” said Georgette angrily. “If speech were restricted to things we meant, we’d soon get down to signs. How can you sit there hunting for meanings with all this grand storm going on outside? How can you do it?”

“Because the storm is outside,” he explained methodically.

“Then we’ll have it in,” she announced gleefully.

She went quickly to one of the door-like windows and flung it wide open. The cool air hurled itself gratefully within the room, bringing all the freshness of the rain and the night. In its damp wild rush it blew out the lamp and left the room in darkness, if darkness it could be called where every second the brilliance of the lightning flashed. The sky seemed to be eternity’s volcano, belching sudden flames. The orchard trees wrestled madly, and Crooning Water near by roared like a torrent.

“The only way to live is to mix in everything that’s going on,” cried Georgette joyously, as a sheet of fire played over her.

“Are you not afraid?” he asked curiously, standing at her side.

“No,” she scoffed. “Of what?”

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The elements answered her, for a bolt struck that minute, and one of the trees writhed in fire and fell apart. Tiny blue flames like live serpents flickered up and down the edge of the window, and the taste of sulphur was strong in the mouth. The terrible detonation shook the very flooring beneath Georgette's feet.

"Oh!" she cried, and threw herself quickly into Horace's arms, pulling them around her as a barrier.

In the breathless stillness that followed the stroke they could hear Rachel in the nursery singing with calming insistence: "There's a light in the valley."

"You *are* afraid," contradicted Horace quietly.

He continued to hold her with a patient courtesy that proclaimed itself ready to endure for several weeks if necessary.

"No," she said, opening the arms as if they had been an iron gate, and stepping outside them.

She walked to the window and pulled it shut, while he brought in the lamp from the kitchen. This he held for a moment in front of her face before placing it on the table.

"No, you are not," he agreed. Something puzzled him. "Then why did you—why did you——" He was constrained to leave off, not knowing how to put it.

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“Why did I seek the protection of your manly chest?” translated Georgette. She stopped to think. Then she walked over to the books and looked carefully among them. “You haven’t got him,” she said at length.

“Who?” he asked.

“Whom,” she threw in pedantically as good measure. “Stendhal. So I’ll have to quote from memory. He says: ‘It is a fine feeling to hold in one’s arms the woman who has long been an enemy, and who is ready to remain an enemy.’ Perhaps I wanted to make you a present of that fine feeling. Me, I’m a suspicion of a philanthropist, me.”

She faithfully copied the Frenchness of Cora, and waved her fingers Gallically, her eyes snapping in blank, insincere defence.

While he was getting ready to speak, Rachel came up to them.

“That was a deafening clap,” she said. “I think the storm is over now, though. That is generally the way. The worst ends it. So heavy a rain! I’ve been feeling sorry for all the frightened mother birds on their nests, whose eggs will be thrown out or whose nestlings will drown. I’ve been worrying about them; haven’t you, Miss Verlaine?”

“Why, I haven’t had time,” apologised Geor-

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gette, looking pleasantly at Horace. "Good night, everybody."

Upstairs in her room Georgette rebraided her hair reflectively.

"Number Four of the Dornblazer family had his chance and did not improve it. I'll learn to respect him pretty soon, and then there's no knowing what mayn't happen."

CHAPTER V

MAY had gone and June was new. Georgette, doing her usual morning-glory act of twining prettily around a porch-post, arraigned the landscape forensically.

"Nature, I hate to say it, but you're nothing but a murderess. One week, the place is lovely with apple blossoms; then, whiff! you send a wind and blow every one to death. Look at that grass. A few days ago purple with violets. You ought to have left them. But no. Biff! you rained and sent them to Hades. The sweetest of all was the lilac hedge. The briefest too. What did you do? Shook it to the ground in brown ashes. *Mother Nature!* H'm! Me—I'd sooner be your orphan than your child, you old Lucretia Borgia."

"Is anything the matter, Miss Verlaine?" placidly called Rachel from the kitchen, where she was ironing.

"I wanted to trim the parlour for this 'gathering,' Ray, and every devilish last violet is gone."

"Miss Verlaine!" The placidity flew. "You promised you wouldn't. Oh, if Rosine or Pauline were to hear——"

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"*Tenez tranquille*, Ray. Your babies are absent. But, honestly, they are more likely to injure my innocence than I theirs. Pauline told me more about the inside furnishing and electric wiring of a hen than I ever hoped to know this side of heaven."

"You'll find beautiful white azaleas across Crooning Water, on the hill," sighed Rachel.

"Ray, cheer up. You know I keep creditably corked before the infants."

"Yes, Miss Verlaine, you do. And I thank you."

"Then the sigh, Ray, was for——?"

"Yourself maybe, Miss Verlaine. From your words people might misjudge you. And you are so sweet and good."

Georgette's slender, clasped fingers locked suddenly. She looked fixedly at the distant hills, seeing far beyond them, remote though they were.

"Ray," she said at last, the undercurrent of laughter gone from her voice, "remember this—I make no pretence about it—sweetness and goodness are the two last crimes on my calendar."

"Tell that to someone else," sang Rachel, with an amused thump of her iron on the board. Georgette wandered to the door and gazed lazily in at her.

"Ironing the insides of the sleeves!" she commented, amazed.

Rachel held up the garment to call attention to

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its tininess. "The little arms are so soft, and scratch so easily," she said pityingly.

"Martyr. Did anyone ever iron the insides of *your* sleeves?"

"Oh, never. And the seams used to hurt so. That's how I know."

"Don't you ever ache to be taken care of—just a little?"

"Why, I——" Rachel looked troubled. She went to the stove and carefully tried all the irons. "Whenever I ache to be taken care of," she remarked, coming back with the hottest, "I know that I must have been neglecting someone myself; so I do something for that person right away." She hunted among the clothes till she found a white tie of Horace's, which she began to iron with extraordinary pains.

"This is no place for me," said Georgette virtuously, turning to the approaching children. "Pauline, will you show me where the shy azalea burgeons? How's that for language, Ray?"

"Yes?" blinked Pauline, seeming to push away the unknown words with her eyelashes. The meaning she grasped. "Yes, I will. But I have to mind Homer while Marma irons. I'll keep him like he is, in his chair. Will you wheel him over the wobbliest part of the bridge?"

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"Call it a bargain," promised Georgette.

"One child's all I can manage up a hill," reflected Pauline. "Rosine, you'd better stay here on the porch, you had."

"Hadn't," scoffed Rosine with withering emphasis, plunging off the porch on the word, and waddling bridgeward.

"Had we better take her?" asked Pauline of the azalea-seeker.

"It seems as if we had."

The four of them set out.

"And gosh darn it," said Pauline very gently, chancing to look behind her. "Here comes the newest and best hybrid."

The Sportless Sport trailed after them, the socket bones of his hind legs sticking up very disconsolately and high as he walked, and flinching occasionally, as if the goad of necessity were jabbing him from the rear, forcing him to follow against his wish.

"You're a ghastly end to a good beginning," Georgette told him. He slunk under it six inches nearer the earth, but kept on coming. She ran her eye down the line of march—first Rosine, defiant and independent; next Homer, so pleased to be journeying that he made himself into a V by the ecstatic raising of his feet; next the hard-working, efficient Pauline; last the dog with the suffering

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lope. "If Broadway could but see me now, I'd need no further advertising for the season."

Poor Pauline had her hands full indeed; for at the bridge, which was merely a plank and a shaky one, Georgette was worse than of no assistance, needing some herself.

"Sit down on it and hump yourself over," advised Pauline at last, and so it was managed. "You, Rosine, get down on your hind legs and front legs, and *worm* across. I'll back over and drag the cart. Sport, you'd better have 'sitted on your tail and skated." For Sport, who had miserably forded, was now more miserably still shuddering drops over everybody.

"Have things your own way," permitted Pauline nervously. "You'll live longer. Rosine, what is it?"

It was a splinter in the finger, and was sending silent tears down Rosine's face.

"Oh, don't cry, Honey," begged Georgette, ministering.

The last word caused Rosine to shut off the flow of water and critically catch a drop on her tongue and taste it.

"Ain't," she announced in a cheated tone. "It's the same juice I always cry."

Pauline eventually got her band across the brook

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and up the hill to where the azaleas were—masses of pale pink, fresh and tender as dawn, in crowded lanes of loveliness.

“Oh, oh, oh!” was all Georgette could say, as she filled her eager arms. The quantity of flowers intoxicated her. She decorated Homer’s cart until it was lost in beauty and he seemed to be smiling from a bower; she crowned Pauline and Rosine, making them look more than ever like impossibly pretty paper dolls; she stuck clusters in her own hair and in her belt; she outraged Sport to the last degree by decorating his collar; and, finally, the cavalcade, pinker than the June itself, wandered singing back towards home.

In a field sloping from the road a man toiled at the plough, a brown sea of fresh furrows testifying to the steady, dogged labour which had endured since the morning. As the pink troupe neared him, he guided his horse to the fence, and was there awaiting them.

“You?” said Georgette nonchalantly. She stopped in the road, leaned her head against the blossoms she held, making a sunshade of them, and frowned quite unfavourably at the ploughed field. “What a freakish amusement!”

“Amusement?” echoed Horace. His face was pale with the strain of it, and his breath came in

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long quivers, just as did the breath of the fine horse which stood beside him and took the respite thankfully.

"I'm sorry for that beast," sympathised Georgette, her eyes admiringly upon it. "He has to keep at it, whether or no."

"And I?" suggested Horace, his handsome, ascetic face kindling with annoyance. "You know well that I am gone from sun-up to sun-down. What did you think I did? 'Amused' myself?"

Georgette seemed to become suffused with contrition. "I'm afraid I've never thought of you at all. But I'll start—and on the things you don't do, which will keep me long from having to ponder on the things you do."

He studied her thoroughly. "There is insinuation again. The subtleness goes over my head. What have I left undone? True, I have not admired you before. But I must to-day. You are so beautiful, it startles me. Your eyes, as you stand looking at me now, are the most softly wonderful eyes I have ever seen in a woman. Your voice reaches out and touches like a caress. You want it to. With the azaleas against your cheek, against your hair, you are like a picture—and you know you are like a picture. So long as you stay there in the road, so long shall I stay here by the fence and give you admiration. I cannot help it."

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Georgette movelessly smiled. "That will do very well—for a beginning."

The irony of her voice made him realise the completeness of what he had said, so he began to lop off a little here and there by continuing :

"Any woman with a song on her lips, flowers in her hands, and children at her knees is a picture for every man to admire. Domesticity——"

"—is a rotten fake," supplied Georgette musically. "It is not I, but Rachel who is playing the domestic drama at the moment, and she is in a hot kitchen, alone, tired out, ruining her complexion over the ironing-board. Just as there is nothing dirtier than cleaning house, so is there nothing more dangerously unsexing than womanliness. I'm idling. As a natural consequence the compliments are coming to me. I'd sooner serve ten years in the House of Correction than one on the home hearth. Come, children."

The little ones, who had been dully waiting for her to get done with Horace, whom they had noticed not at all, now whooped revivingly. Singing, they pulled her down the hill.

She had been gone from sight several minutes before the man with the plough shook off his thoughts, and took to the next furrow.

"How many folk are going to gather, Ray, and

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what shall I wear for them?" asked Georgette that night.

"Only a few neighbours, but wear something pretty," coaxed Rachel, who had disguised her own charms by clogging herself up in a starched white dress, thriftily short, displaying stickily shined, durable boots.

"Do you like your hair in a cinnamon bun, Ray? You could thatch the whole first row of the chorus with what you have."

"I wouldn't feel tidy with it puffed out," excused Rachel. "And I roll it tight so's Homer won't pull it down."

"Your crown of domesticity wouldn't wobble so if you widened your hair under it," was Georgette's undecipherable remark as she went away.

"Why, what have you done to yourself?" gasped Rachel later, meeting her in the parlour and bursting with admiration.

"Just dressed," said Georgette naively. Which truly was all. But "just dressing" was her best gift. Her silk gown, *à la jeune fille*, cut low enough only to show the soft roundness of her neck, was of a blue so fugitive that Cora used adoringly to describe it as "moonlight, ah, on a drream of forget-me-nots." Her only ornament was the

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azaleas in her hair, which, be it mentioned, was *not* in cinnamon buns.

Horace, whose get-up in the interest of the company to come consisted only of a careful shave in addition to "his clothes," was struck still and dumb by her fairness. He merely looked.

"Why don't you put a flower in his buttonhole, Ray?" asked Georgette.

"A flower in his buttonhole!" echoed Rachel, as amazed as if she had been asked to tie a cabbage on his ear.

"Brrr!" buzzed Georgette impatiently. Pulling a blossom from her hair, she pinned it on his coat and smiled up at him as she did so. It was the first human regard she had ever shown him, and he took it with a rush of surprised gratitude, much as a dog does who, fearing it might be in the way, gets a pat where it expected a blow.

Yet Horace's first impulse was to remove the flower, and his hand went towards it, but the fragrance he noticed was not the fragrance of the bud but of the hair where it had been, and, after a second's indecision, he let his decoration remain.

He took a book and stiffly ensconced himself in the unusual comforts of the parlour chair; Rachel did the same, and Georgette, feeling as if she were at a dentist's, followed their decorous example.

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"Feels funny to be in here, doesn't it?" she asked cheerfully. "As a rural rule, isn't it only ministers and corpses who get into the parlour?"

Plainly it was no time for cheerful conversation, so Georgette had leisure to survey her surroundings. The room, scrubbed so recently that it was redolent of good brown soap, was a trim, square apartment of boxlike unyieldingness, and was carpeted with ingrain carpet of bright green erupting in strange red bouquets all tied together by a winding yellow sash. On the wall were crayon enlargements of past and gone Dornblazers, the men very black as to hair and moustache and very white and expansive as to shirt-front, the women very lacy as to low collar and extremely buttoned down the waist. At the windows were white curtains, so starched that they stuck out into the room. The horsehair sofa was piled high with vivid-hued cushions, representing the industry of aunts and cousins, and their yuletide affections, back through many, many years. And on the nobly varnished centre-table was a Bible so colossal that it took up all the space, necessitating that the lamp be placed on top of the book itself, which was done.

The two Dusenberrys were the first to arrive, and they turned out to be well-to-do Dutch farm-folk, of whom the male side was in the temper

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usual to it when it is taken out at night against its will. Mrs. Dusenberry, a tiny, trim old lady, as finely profiled as a princess, was plainly nervous as to how long her lord would last without exploding, and kept endeavouring to conciliate him by a round of stylish courtesies. He was old, stout, honestly sleepy, and had a red, stubborn face, though not an unkindly one, set in a sunflower arrangement of wild hair and whiskers.

"Cornbeef boiled in cabbage," thought Georgette descriptively.

"Sit down, Jake, sit down," said Horace hospitably. As for Mrs. Dusenberry, that was Rachel's affair.

And down Jake immediately sat in the best chair, there to take off his boots. He pulled the second best chair towards him and put his two stockinged feet upon it, his shoes flanking him ornamentally on either side.

Pretty little Mrs. Dusenberry flushed painfully.

"Pop, he works so hardt all day it iss, that his two feet they burn him," she murmured to Rachel. This was apologising for her mate and yet extolling his industry, all in one masterly stroke. "Ant how iss Homer now yet ? "

"Very well, thank you."

"Ant how too iss Rosine ant Pauline ? "

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"Very well, thank you. How is Jakey, Mrs. Dusenberry?"

"Chakey he is fine."

"And Arthur?"

"Arsur he iss fine."

"And Joe?"

"Choe he iss fine."

"And Lizzie?"

"Lissie she iss fine."

"And Catherine?"

"Casserine she iss fine."

"That seems to be all," reflected Georgette.

"Rachel, with only three children, has still something to live for."

"Ant this iss the actress, I guess yet," said Mrs Dusenberry, smiling at her admiringly. It struck Georgette then, for the first time, that the refinement of Rachel and Horace had never once named to her her profession. "How iss you, mom?"

"Chust fine," said Georgette before she could stop herself, but covering up her mimicry by a winsome shaking of hands.

The ears of Horace were sensitive. He flung her an intent look.

"Ve seen a show in New York once already," said Mrs. Dusenberry. "Ant it vas call—let me see, it vas call—vy, I forgets so eassy I forgets my head

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if it vasn't stduck dight. Pop, vat is that show's name yet, Pop ? "

" I don' remember it no more, its name," he said stolidly, the name all but leaping from his eye. He was not going to visit and be agreeable.

" Oh, yess, you do yet, Pop," she urged coaxingly.

" I don' remember it no more," he repeated, about willing to brain her with it.

" Pop, he don' no more remember that name yet," translated Mrs. Dusenberry to Georgette.

" They changed it," said Georgette firmly.

" Pop " showed visible chagrin, his hoarded knowledge now being below par.

" Iss—that—sso ? " observed Mrs. Dusenberry, laboriously polite.

Georgette nodded. Horace eyed her so challengingly that she went kindly into particulars. " Changed it in December. December's a changeful time in New York, both with things and people. The June brides begin to come home, you see."

" I see," said little Mrs. Dusenberry blankly.

" Here's Mrs. Shank," introduced Rachel, from behind a walking bale of calico, " and Danny Shank."

" Sit down, Danny, sit down," said Horace, doing the male honours.

Danny Shank was old and withered and dry

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and curious, his skin a wan green colour, so that he looked just like an intelligent grasshopper, even to the ruminating movement of the lower mandibles in his long green face. When he sat in a chair and hoisted his thin spikes of legs upon the topmost rung, the grasshopper effect fairly staggered one. Georgette was lush grass in his eye, from the pleased look he took on.

"Howdy?" he demanded.

"Great," she replied. "How's yourself?"

"I ain't complaining," he said cautiously, rubbing up and down one thin knee where the complaint usually lodged.

"How is your wheat?" asked Horace hurriedly, his eyes flickering away from Georgette, who had shown symptoms of having more to say.

"My wheat grows," said Danny Shank with satisfaction. "All I has grows. I guess the Lord remembers I was an old man, and He sends me success. Not but what He makes me work gosh hard for it."

"My landy, but you're a pretty little gull, my dear," panted Mrs. Danny Shank, on introduction. "You may thank your stars you're thin. What makes me so fat fair beats me. I eat the same things as him." She waddled an explanatory head at the wisp of grasshopper on the chair

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That the grasshopper had become enamoured of the thin "gull" was very evident. He cast a furious eye at the churlish Dusenberry, whose pre-emption of the second-best parlour chair reduced Georgette to an inferior seat. This worried him so that at last he ventured to inquire into her comfort.

"How air you sotting?" he demanded of her tenderly.

"Sotting elegant," murmured Georgette with flattered timidity.

To cheer this timidity, Danny Shank started off at once on his best anecdote. "Old Dory Bellus worked down to Gene Hardin's, and Gene ain't never one to feed his help any too high. But old Dory, he don't see extra good in them days. Them days, too, they et their mashed 'taters in milk. And a bowl of it was handed to Dory Bellus, who paid no 'tention to it at the time, eatin' away at succotash. He never bethinked hisself of the 'taters till the flies had fell pretty thick in 'em; then he bleared down into the bowl, and his face lighted up something wonderful and pleasant, an' he looked at the rest of the boys, tellin' them proud what was to come. 'Huckleberries an' cream, b'gosh!' he says! Ha, ha, ha, hee, hee, haw!" Seeing that Georgette's face was gentle and worried, he said, "See? don't yer?"

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"No; not quite," murmured she pleadingly.
"Tell it again."

"Why, old Dory Bellus, he couldn't see the flies was what was fell in his'n, so he says, 'Huckleberries an' cream, b'gosh!' Ha, ha, ha, hee, hee, haw!"

"Oh, he didn't *like* huckleberries!" said Georgette brightly.

The grasshopper's prongs waved desperately. "Why, yes, he did; lots. But they *wasn't*. You see, the flies had fell considerable thick into his 'taters—'taters stewed in milk—and old Dory Bellus, he couldn't see any too good, so he blears into the bowl an' says, 'Huckleberries an' cream, b'gosh!' See? Ha, ha, ha, hee, hee, haw! See?"

Georgette was slowly shaking her lovely head when she caught sight of Rachel's pitying face, so she nodded assent grudgingly. "I see."

The grasshopper chewed madly to get his poise back.

"That couldn't chance to *you*—no?" ventured little Mrs. Dusenberry gently. "You, Mr. Shank, see pretty goot mit your eyes—only, issn't it yet?" meaning that he needed no glasses.

"I see pretty good," said Danny Shank in a reserving tone. "But, then, each time, I *know* I see pretty good. Before—I don't stop to know it. When you know, once, you're doing a thing pretty

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good, it's a sign for sure you ain't doing it near so good as when you didn't know."

"S-so?" breathed Mrs. Dusenberry mildly. "Ant"—the use of the "and" was to connect her wide topic with the one on hand—"Ant how iss Katey's baby?"

"Mr. Shank pow-wows for sprue, Miss Verlaine," explained Rachel.

Had it been any other than the unhumorous Rachel, Georgette would have roared at the words. But from Rachel they were worth investigating.

"Pow-wows?" besought Georgette. "Sprue? *Pow-wows for sprue?*"

She noticed that Horace stirred restlessly, bespeaking his lack of sympathy with Rachel's next remark:

"It's a cure, you know, a pow-wow is. And sprue is a baby's sore mouth. Little Katey was in a bad way till Katey, her mother, got Mr. Shank to pow-wow."

"Could you pow a little now?" begged Georgette of the grasshopper.

"It's only for sprue," said Danny mystically. "And of course I don't dare say the words 'thout a case of it."

"Words? what words?"

"From the Cherman Pipple, mom, they iss,"

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explained Mrs. Dusenberry. "A man can tell it only to a voman, and a voman to a man. Unt it comes down from son to son. *My pow-vow iss for erysipelas.* Unt Katey herself, she pow-vows for blood."

"My goodness!" gasped Georgette admiringly. "And this is only three hours from the Hudson tunnel."

"Miss Verlaine," put in Horace, "the pow-wow is a tradition in this section of the country—one hesitates to call it a superstition—and many strange coincidences of cure have happened, and happen continually, to fasten the faith which prevails in it."

His voice, coming on top of the uncouth utterances preceding it, fell with a melodious and cultured effect which made it very charming.

"Ant how iss Katey's baby?" persisted Mrs. Dusenberry patiently.

"The sprue's fading," said Danny Shank positively.

"S-so?"

After Katey's baby was thoroughly dissected:

"We all want you should speak a piece for us," chuckled Mrs. Shank, looking at Georgette in delighted expectation.

"Speak a piece?" stammered Georgette, hardly

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believing her ears. " "When are you going to h'act, Mr. Garrick? " " she quoted.

" Yes ; we all want you should speak." And Mrs. Shank settled her mountainous self back in ecstasy.

" Recite for us, please, Miss Verlaine," begged Rachel.

At this Horace made a nervous movement of consternation, and the look that he threw at the girl in forget-me-not blue said plainly : " I was too doltishly slow to protect you from this outrage ; forgive me, and forgive those under my roof. Of course you have but to refuse."

Georgette interpreted the look aright, and in return she signalled him this :

" You are a pretty decent fellow. But I will recite. And for you."

Aloud, she said pleasantly :

" Certainly, Ray."

She stood up and drew back a little, so as to get her range upon everyone in the room ; then, to the polite disappointment of all but a single listener, she gave Shakespeare's Seven Ages.

At the beginning Pop Dusenberry opened one eye long enough to find out that he couldn't understand, then shut it again ; Danny Shank seemed to wave his prongs in expectation, then to wither into

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pained silence; the two visiting ladies were too busy studying Georgette's wonderful gown to pay heed to her voice; and Rachel, as the hostess, beamed with pride slightly tempered with misgivings, something like a parent whose son is letting off fireworks and who considers them a bit too noisy, but very creditable to the establishment.

Horace made magnetic response to every demand required by the magnificent words, his mobile face lighting and changing to each change in the measured music. The day's weariness fell magically away from him. His eyes kindled over the delicately shaded humour of the first lines, burned softly with the lover's ecstasy, glowed with the warrior fire, darkened with pride, and at last filled with the pain and tears of the final tragedy. His quick intake of suspended breath and his passionate silence, as Georgette's voice faltered to the pathetic close, were the loudest praises she could receive. The other listeners were more vocal.

"My landy!" dubiously from heaving Mrs. Shank.

"S-so! that iss fine!" in Mrs. Dusenberry's ready courtesy.

"Thank you ever so much, Miss Verlaine." And Rachel glided away to bring in refreshments.

"Gene Hardin, he tells me of a funny joke all

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right," broke in Danny Shank. "He says there was a feller threw a pumpkin up in the air and it kem down *squash*! Ha, ha, ha, hee, hee, haw! See? *Squash*!"

"Oh, no," said Georgette firmly. "He threw it up squash and it came down pumpkin. Of course a pumpkin would come down squash; there's no trick in that." She felt reasonably safe, for Horace was at the bookshelf, with Shakespeare in his hands, avidly going over the lines just spoken. But Rachel came in with custard pie and cut short her enjoyment.

Pop Dusenberry woke up sufficiently to cross his socks and eat three pieces of pie. He really drank them; sloosh slid the custard down his throat; the trowel-shaped wedges of dough he put back upon the plate.

"I hat a cousin fifdeen years ago," said Mrs. Dusenberry, in anguished explanation of her eccentric partner, "who laid once too much bottom-crust on her stummick, ant——"

"She died," put in Georgette sepulchrally.

"Yess," said Mrs. Dusenberry, quite amazed.

Georgette ate her portions heroically.

"Who pows-wows for pie-crust?" she asked precautiously of Danny Shank. And he looked at her with dawnings of misgiving.

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"Miss Verlaine," called Horace smoothly.

Thinking there was a volume on the shelves requiring her elucidation, she walked over to him. His face was alive with the anger of championship.

"I have watched you closely to-night," he began in quick, low speech.

"I've noticed it."

"Your thought has played with these people as though they were scarcely human!"

"Are they?"

"Old Danny, crippled with rheumatism, ploughed my ten-acre field one spring when I had pneumonia."

"I didn't give him rheumatism; nor you pneumonia."

"Jake has a heart——"

"All wool, like his socks."

"Little Mrs. Dusenberry stayed with Rachel the night that Pauline was born." Horace paled with the frightened memories, and spoke like a benediction. "She was here when Rosine came. She stayed here forty-eight hours, dressed and sleepless, when Homer was born——"

"We'd better have a recount to-morrow morning," advised Georgette warningly.

Speech died on his lips, and the flash faded impotently from his eyes.

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"God!" was his slow question; "are none of us real to you? not even I?"

"'Not even'——!" she scoffed. "And 'I? I? I?' always on your lips. Do you think I put in my spare time thinking of you?"

And with the triumphant audacity of a diver who hurls himself, lance-like, into an untried, unknown gulf, he said daringly:

"Yes!"

But the breaking up of the "gathering" had arrived, and farewells were being waited for. Georgette did her part graciously. Gliding out, finally, to the moonlit porch, thinking all were gone, she surprised "Pop" Dusenberry having a stolid last talk with Rachel. Neither of them saw her.

As a skirmisher, he looked hard at the honey-suckle still in bloom over the doorway and remarked gutturally:

"Dat wine stays goot yet, there-up."

Rachel glanced at it and agreed.

Then he came to the gist.

"You're a prave woman, Rashel Dornblazer."

"Brave?"

"Hey, prave. To let a girl so schmardt as her, unt a girl so sharp as her, unt a girl so pretty as seldom vas, stay inside of your family mit your

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husband already, who still iss a very young man yet. Good night."

Rachel drew quickly back from him. But he turned away without saying more and strode off.

Georgette weakly put her head against the bracing doorway and broke into spasms of clear, sincere laughter.

Then, next moment, Rachel was laughing too.

CHAPTER VI

BECAUSE the azaleas had gone the way of the violets, and because the wild laurel, that beautiful laggard of the mountain, had quite gone too, leaving only the rhododendron in flaunting pink possession of the wood-edges, it was plain to be seen that June was past and that July held hot triumph in the country-side.

"I keep track of the months at a pinch," volunteered Georgette, swinging idly in the hammock. "But, for my soul's sake, don't ask me what day it is."

She said this to rouse Pauline, who was working heroically to make Rosine repeat her text. And Pauline roused.

"Why, Miss Verlaine, it's Sunday!"

"And you quarrelling with your sister! Tut, tut!"

"I'm really not quarrelling," explained Pauline, wiping drops of exertion from her forehead. "I'm only trying to make her say the Twenty-third Psalm, and it's loud work. Rosine, you *must* say it."

"Mus'n't," sang Rosine in a placid little tune.

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"But you've *got* to say it at Sunday-school."

"*Gotn't*," continued Rosine gently, greatly enjoying her powers of drawing out Pauline's conversationalism. But Pauline felt so responsible for Rosine's seemliness in Sunday-school that she had no time to feel enjoyment herself nor to admire it in anyone else.

"Rosine," she said presently, growing so desperate that she resorted to threat, "you say your psalm or I'll set the dog on you."

Rosine flickered her heavenly eyes at Sport and plainly debated. His "setting" ability she had never seen put to the proof. She was wisely afraid of the unknown and therefore bowed to it. "The law is my sheppud," she gave out cautiously. "I shallunt want."

"Marma, she knows it!" shrieked Pauline, gladly relinquishing responsibility.

"That is good, darling," said Rachel, appearing on the porch and coming down to the hammock group. One of the perplexities of housekeeping was upon her, and she therefore sought her five-year-old daughter for help. "Pauline, the butter is all."

Georgette threw in a query. "The butter is what, Ray?"

"All," said Rachel.

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"All—what?" persisted Georgette.

"Gone, I guess," explained Rachel, smiling.

"And I can't churn till to-morrow. Pauline, will you go to Mrs. Shank's, please, and ask her to lend Marma a cup of butter?"

Pauline rose to go.

"Ray," expostulated Georgette, "are you going to send that baby a mile by herself?"

"Why, Pauline is five years old, Miss Verlaine," said Rachel, "and she ought to be getting a little common sense pretty soon."

"I *have* common sense, right now, Marma," urged Pauline wistfully.

"Haven't," whispered Rosine to Sport's motionless tail.

"Rosine," implored Pauline, "I *have* common sense."

"Haven't," warbled Rosine a little louder.

"Oh, I *have*!" And Pauline clasped her anguished hands.

"Haven't," quite chanted Rosine.

"Pauline," said Rachel mildly, "the best way of proving your common sense to Rosine is by going off on Marma's errand."

"And I'll go with her," said Georgette, tumbling gaily from the hammock, and throwing the hair back from her face. She looked about fifteen.

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"River of my race," ordered Rosine suddenly, detaining her by the skirt.

Rachel opened her eyes questioningly, and Pauline explained: "It's a game of Miss Verlaine's. It's 'R-river of my r-r-race, r-receive-uh muh!' Then Miss Verlaine pushes her head-first into the hammock."

Rachel still looking dubious, "It's perfectly proper, Ray," said Georgette dryly. She picked Rosine up in her arms, a squirming, breathless, frightened, delighted, gasping bundle, and she swung her ominously. "'River of my race,'" intoned Georgette tragically, "'receive me!'" And at the command Rosine hurtled wildly through the air and plunged into the whirling meshes of the hammock, only to stagger dizzily out again and demand hungrily:

"More!"

"Why 'River of my race'?" asked Rachel.

"Oh, it was a part I played once—a lovelorn Indian maid who committed suicide in the Ohio River or the Mississippi or something; at any rate it was dashing madly and had our best brand of moon thrown on it. I got a hand every night, and after every drowning took a curtain call, dry as a bone." She clutched up the twitching Rosine and swung her, preparatory. "'R-river of my r-race,

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r-receive-uh muh!" Swish! and Rosine shot to her coveted doom. "Get a move on you, Pauline."

"Dear Miss Verlaine," begged Rachel.

Georgette coughed discreetly. "Acquire a hastiness then, Pauline."

"And a can for the butter," said Pauline, the ever reliable, running for it.

Together they set out, crossing Crooning Water, climbing the opposite bank by the cow trail, and cutting through cornfields.

"I need an alpenstock for this," said Georgette, pulling a stout sapling for her use. She did not talk much to Pauline, the two being on such good terms that silence mattered little.

"If you were a chipmunk," said Pauline in the course of the march, one of those nervous quadrupeds running along the fence in garrulous advance of them, "which would you sooner do—chip or munk?"

"Chip," selected Georgette. "I wouldn't munk for a million."

That seemed to be about all for a good half-mile.

"If I had an apple," then said Georgette ruminatingly, "and you had a bite, what would you do?"

"Chew it," said Pauline unhesitatingly.

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"Wrong," announced Georgette. "Scratch it."

"Oh, that sort of a bite," was Pauline's deeply serious discovery.

"Pauline," said Georgette with a swift, odd wistfulness, "I'm beginning to like you."

"Oh, Miss Verlaine," accused Pauline, who was a believer in immediate reciprocity, "I loved you on the very start!"

"I always try not to."

"Oh, why?"

"It's only people you love who can hurt you."

Suddenly they both jumped a trifle and Georgette screamed. A snake lay stretched on the path.

"It's a blazzer," whispered Pauline, sizing it up. The reptile lay so motionless as to appear dead, except for its balefully alive eyes. "Give me your alpenstock," demanded Pauline capably.

As the child raised the stick, the snake, too, rose suddenly, flattening its head and neck like a cobra.

Whack! down came the stick. "To make faces at me!" scolded Pauline nervously. She criticised the enemy, which had given up the ghost at the very first blow. "They're easy die-ers," she said, "But I'll mash him to make sure." Taking a rock in her tiny dimpled hand, she pounded the blazzer's evil head into harmlessness, punctuating her exertions with panting scraps of narrative. "Mrs. Dusenberry

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—had a uncle—she did—who was shocking up corn one day—and a blazzer shoted poison—into his face—and he died.”

“ I believe you,” shuddered Georgette.

The rest of the way to the Shanks’ was picked very carefully.

They found old Danny Shank in unembarrassed *déshabillé*, shaving on the front porch.

“ How do ? ” was his affable greeting, for he was using the mirror as a medium for the eyes, and declined to turn around. “ Sot. She’ll be out in a minut. I’m cleaning myself fur church. Why ain’t you never been yet to meeting, Miss Verlaine ? ”

“ Because,” explained Georgette, “ I was too run down morally, when I came, to take risks, you see.” She sat on one of the wobbly wooden chairs and gazed appraisingly at the whitely scrubbed porch and the geraniums in baked-bean cans.

“ Um, I see,” agreed Danny, scraping loudly and rhythmically, making hummocks in his cheek with his tongue. “ But now you’re well, you might git around some night, heh ? ”

“ I might. In fact, I will. It is a diversion I never thought of before. Thanks.”

Here Mrs. Shank circled through the door and rolled sociably down upon them, her masses of flesh all genially a-quake. “ Come on in,” she yelled

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delightedly, and, billowing around, she rolled back through the door again.

Georgette and Pauline politely followed her into the kitchen, a huge, clean place, raftered in heavy oak beams, from which hung multitudinous tin cans, holding seeds and herbs. The ancient fire-place, big as a cupboard and having double folding doors to shut it from sight, boasted the newest kind of department-store stove, in the highest state of polish. Paper bags, or "sacks" as Mrs. Shank called them, filled with green beans in the process of drying, decorated each side of the fire-place like a belated array of Christmas stockings. By a window sat an extremely young and extremely pretty and modest-looking girl, who was sorting over a baby's layette. And the burden of the coming mystery of motherhood was heavy upon her.

"Jenny," said Mrs. Shank to her, when Pauline had explained her errand, "run down cellar and fetch me a crock."

As the shy young girl went on her awkward way, Georgette's eyes followed her pitifully.

"She seems very young for—that," she murmured to the mother.

"Oh, Jenny's past sixteen," said Mrs. Shank, bridling importantly.

"Is her husband young too?"

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"She ain't married 'as yet," said Mrs. Shank. "Her man's got a good job down to Phillipsburg, and he don't want to give it up till he has to. I tell Jenny she's kiner putting things off, and I tell him so too. But they don't neither worry none. They've fixed their own time. It seems these days as if the young folks knew they own business."

"It certainly looks that way," stammered Georgette.

"But Jenny's a good girl for all her stubbornness," championed her mother. "As all my girls is good girls. There isn't a man as isn't ready and willing to marry 'em when the time comes."

"That so?" murmured Georgette politely, her glance falling by chance through the window and upon a young woman who sat in the grass amusing a child.

Seeing this, Mrs. Shank bridled and quivered in anxiety to explain.

"That Anginette out there, now 'twasn't noways her fault. The wedding day was sot, and I had the fruit cake baked a'ready, and her man died. He was a brakeman, and his cars run over him—up to Pocono it was."

"Oh, dear!" cried Georgette, wringing her hands together. "And then the baby came?"

"Yes. Poor Anginette carried on something

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awful till I says : ' Now, look a here, hunt for the bright side of this thing. ' Stead of bemoaning for yourself, take comfort in knowing that your child's father was a good Christian man,' I says."

" And did she take comfort ? " asked Georgette, her eyes fascinatedly on the pale Anginette.

" Some," admitted Mrs. Shank.

On Jenny's moving slowly into the room with the butter-crock, Georgette flew to relieve her of it, and the girl blushed with timid pleasure.

" My boys," said Mrs. Shank, scooping butter mathematically, " is scattered all over." She laughed fatly as she thought of it, taking a thumb-nail of butter and tasting it as a precautionary measure before sending it to a neighbour. " Mahlon, he's working down to the Gap. Am̃say, he's married down to Stroudsburg. Melchior, he's married up to Binghamton. And Abe, he's working across to Swiftwater."

Georgette grinned blithely in appreciation of the apparent cessation of work in the married contingent.

Pauline, who had been sitting demurely silent, yet with eyes which roved critically everywhere, now said in tones of authority :

" Mis' Shank, you began drying your beans mighty early."

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"Well, yes—rather," confessed Mrs. Shank, as to a higher critic.

"But thank you for the butter," said Pauline, rising, and commending where she could.

"Come again," wheezed Mrs. Shank unctuously to her departing visitors.

"See you later," was Georgette's porch farewell to Danny, who, sitting shaved and fierce upon a chair, his knees humped up and his fingers fighting with an unmanageable brace-buckle, was a closer copy of a grasshopper by day even than by night.

Back at Crooning Water again, Georgette made Rachel shell her peas down by the hammock.

"Because I want you to tell me what you are doing among these people, Ray, you're so different."

"The Shanks?" hazarded Rachel shrewdly, the peas popping musically into the tin pan in her lap.

"Um," said Georgette severely. "Specially Jenny. Likewise Anginette."

Rachel's cheek grew peachier than ever, but she placidly shelled past these topics. "The Shanks are kind, honest people," she said, "but not so fine as the Dusenberrys. Mrs. Dusenberry was a Von Vliet. In her own country she would be much thought of. Dr. Congdon, who heard her speak in her own tongue, says that her Dutch and German

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are both perfect, and that her manners are those of the nobility."

"And where did you meet *him*?" inquired Georgette interestedly.

"Horry?" asked Rachel. *Him* sectionally never meant anyone but one's husband.

"No. John Congdon. Bless him, I've thought of him all day."

"After Rosine was born, I had to go to a New York hospital," said Rachel, shelling quietly past a crisis which would have furnished a city woman with clinical conversation for years and years.

"And Dr. Congdon was on the staff."

"Goodness, Ray, what a yea, yea-er, and a nay, nay-er you are," said Georgette impatiently. "It's like pulling teeth to get romantic detail out of you. And now Horace; what made you fall in love with him?"

Rachel quite blushed and fidgeted, shelling peas in terrific haste.

"The Dornblazers and the Beseckers—I was a Besecker—were always good friends. And I used to be as much at home in his house as in my own. But Horry was always away, trying to work through college. Then Dan, his eldest brother, died, and the old man, whose heart was set on there being always a Dornblazer farm, called Horry back to run it.

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And Horry gave up college, at a big sacrifice of his own wishes, and came home. He's been paying off Dan's debts ever since his father died—his father worried over them. Horace knew so much, I asked him to teach me. And he gave me some lessons, and then—and then—I fell in love with him."

"Go 'way," said Georgette crossly. "You're so tame you put me to sleep. Go 'way." And she settled herself dozily into the hammock.

"I'm finished anyway," smiled Rachel, going back to the house with her pan of peas. "And I'll cook a sprig of mint with them," she reflected aloud.

In the ensuing peace Georgette indeed slept, waking long afterwards at feeling the rough caress of a man's hand upon her hair. When she opened her eyes, the man himself was standing with folded arms frowning at her.

"You lovely John Congdon!" smiled Georgette drowsily, but not moving from her effective supineness. "Did you drop from heaven?"

"You sleep well?" he demanded professionally.

"Twenty hours out of the twenty-four," she answered. "But don't talk of me. Talk of you. Talk of little old New York. How's the bunch?"

"You eat well?" he pursued dogmatically.

"Like a horse. John, for the Lord's sake have done, and cough up some news of the gang."

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"Faint any more?"

"No," glowered Georgette, getting sulky. "What are you doing here, anyhow? I thought none of you men were to come down. Aren't you breaking rules?"

He took her wrist and counted her pulse methodically.

"Right-o?" she asked impudently, rubbing the mark of his fingers from the place when she got her hand back.

"Get up, please."

"Won't move!" fumed Georgette.

Sighing over the necessity, he gripped the hammock taut, and then slid her as from a board to her indignant feet.

"Now shut your eyes and extend your arms."

"Tests, tests, tests!" snapped Georgette, who had been through it before. She did as she was told.

"Bring your forefingers together."

She did so, and then opened her eyes triumphantly as her finger-tips touched accurately.

"Shut your eyes again," he ordered. "Now walk forward, straight, to the tree that was in front of you."

"'In front' is citified and correct," ruminated she, walking straight as an arrow from the bow, "but to speak of a tree or a barn that is 'in back'

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of a place, as they do around here, is rural and wrong. I wonder why. Now, you big idiot, I've bumped my nose against the tree. Are you satisfied ? ”

She opened her eyes angrily.

“ Satisfied,” he answered, looking it. A few months ago, and she could not walk blindfolded without falling. •

“ Then pour out some news about the pals,” she coaxed, curling into the hammock again.

“ Those who are not abroad or in retreat are yapping on the curbs as usual,” he said shortly, taking Rachel's vacated chair.

“ You've got a new suit,” she said fondly, admiring it and reaching lazily for his sleeve, the cuff of which she rubbed in ecstasy. “ What a ducky little lot of buttons ! ”

“ That'll do,” he advised, retrieving his arm. “ Don't be fulsome.”

“ Haven't you any news ? ”

“ Yes Smith is back,” he said, watching her narrowly.

“ Yes Smith ! ” she marvelled. “ Brought all his money back too ? ”

“ So it seems.”

“ Wonder whether he shook England, or if England fired him. Not that it matters. The grand

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fact is that Yes and his millions are ours again. Yes Smith is the only man whose strength I was ever afraid of."

"Why?" contemptuously.

"Because he is the only man I know who is not afraid of my weakness." She seemed to be dwelling with undue pleasure upon some memories.

"I suppose you know the man is thoroughly bad?" hazarded Congdon.

"Rotten," intensified Georgette. "Otherwise he wouldn't be Yes Smith. I think I'll wander back to New York town."

"You'll stay right here through August."

"O K. Doctor's orders," she acquiesced readily.

Congdon leaned forward and frowned thoughtfully into her charming face.

"You look so childish and sweet, I believe you've been up to mischief."

"Is that what you came to look into?" she asked astutely.

He sat back plainly worried. He did not see, until she was nearly upon him, Rachel, who came hastening from the house, Homer in her round white arms, and Rosine and Pauline at her skirts.

"Rache!" he cried happily, standing at gaze before her, drinking in the good sight of her big beauty. Her green-checked gingham dress and the

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graceful poise of her brown head suggested his complimentary next: "You straight, tall, beautiful, fruitful cornstalk of a woman, you!"

Rachel went off into her rare laugh, a frank and friendly sound.

"Ray," counselled Georgette, "call him a yellow turnip of a man, and get even."

"Bairnies, bairnies," cooed Congdon to the children, who grinned with wide, pleased silence at him. "Rache, thank you for curing this girl in the hammock."

Rachel tucked in Georgette's feet with a gentleness that bespoke sincere affection. "Thank you, rather, for sending us such a bright sunbeam of a girl," she said. Almost unconsciously she kissed Georgette.

At this a big load seemed to slip suddenly from the doctor's back, and he cleared the frown from his face.

"Where's Horace?" he said, and there was relief in his voice.

"Gone to Canadensis to read to a friend who is ill," said Rachel. "You won't see him till this evening."

"That's not at all," said Congdon ruefully, looking at his watch. "I have but a few minutes more to stay."

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"Dr. Congdon," pleaded Rachel gravely, "please don't think of trying to catch the train back. And I believe you walked from the station! Take dinner with us. Except for peas, I'm not cooking anything. We're just piecing to-day, but if you'll only stay I'll fry you some of the elder-blossom pancakes you like."

"Thank you, Rachel, but I am going back. I am busy in the city to-night."

"A seven-hour journey and a seven-mile walk just to see little me," cackled Georgette, squirming *delightedly in the hammock*.

"Not exactly," he dissented, the troubled frown coming back. "I—I needed my sweater."

"A seven-hour journey and a seven-mile walk just to keep an eye on little me," amended Georgette flexibly.

And though he still frowned at her, the dissent was wanting in his gaze.

"Good-bye," he said softly, as if the word hurt him.

"‘Good-a-bye, John, I gotta go,’" she quoted carelessly. She stretched out her slim hand for his, but on second thoughts drew it back again. "We won't be fuisome," she babbled obediently.

"Oh, if I could only drive you over!" mourned Rachel.

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"A seven-mile sprint," murmured Georgette with praise. "Very fair for middle age."

"Middle age!" The word whipped him. "I guess I'm still young enough," was his caustic speech.

"Young enough for what?" asked Georgette in great curiosity, shoving her elbow under her mass of hair, and looking hard at him.

He studied her so intently that it was evident she had turned from a woman into a specimen.

"You may not have any soul, of course," he pronounced scientifically, "but if you have, and it ever wakes, you'll feel sorry for some of these things you say."

With that he was gone. "I'll mail your sweater," Georgette called gently after him.

The hot, quiet Sunday passed as hot, quiet Sundays do. Horace came back in time for supper, and then harnessed the horses to the surrey for church-going.

It was decidedly a family affair, encompassing not only the three adults and the three children, but also Sport, who clambered with fearful sighs into the vehicle and flung himself bonily at the bottom, where he was much in the way of the feet.

"Nor is Sport the only Christian dog we have," commented Georgette interestedly when they arrived

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at the meeting-house, seeing that fox-terriers and hounds and collies were greatly and restlessly in evidence around the front door and up the aisles.

Outside, the meeting-house was almost as gay as a circus, so many were the vehicles in number and style, and so picturesquely tied to fence and trees. And inside was not much better, in point of calm, for the host of babies present fretted and goo-ed in the hot stuffiness, and were noisily bounced in the air by totally unembarrassed mothers. Family dogs of faithful dispositions found it quite a trial to guard the horses without and the humans within, and consequently trotted much from altar to roadway, their anxious tongues protruding, and their breath coming hard. Sikey, the Shanks' bull-terrier, had a disposition not only faithful to his own family but to religion as well, and kept ambling inspectingly around the sacred edifice, sniffing into all suspicious pews, and making many nervous trips to the lectern, around the holy base of which he seemed to smell rats and to worry accordingly.

Sport, who felt that he could safely leave the horses with his master, stalked solemnly up the aisle after Rachel and her train, taking his weary rest at the mouth of the pew. Horace, with the greater part of the men, sat at the back of the

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building ready to slip outside in case of equine differences of opinion to be settled.

Georgette glanced keenly around her, sympathising with every sunburned male neck in its unaccustomed collar, admiring every pretty girl in modish costume and coiffure, all carefully and skilfully copied from the latest fashion magazines. Youth is never rural, and these stylish maidens could have held their own in any city of the world, so far as appearances went. The older women had given up the sartorial fight long ago, and were content to wear short black skirts, and nondescript waists, in which their rounded shoulders, bent with too heavy work, bulged out like the shoulders of hunchbacks. The young men were all very dreadful, and seemed to be aware of it, and to act slouchily in consequence, making multitudinous faces, one to the other, and chewing surreptitious quids. Sikey always circled widely past them in his busy rounds, as if kicks were forthcoming from that unsafe quarter.

When the organ gave its first squeak, at the hands of a limp woman with a dispirited back very poorly belted, Sikey made a nervous gallop towards it, using only three legs, as was his custom when he wanted to make haste, and barked once, but in a churchly whisper. After he recognised the combination of woman and instrument, he gave an

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apologetic whine in excuse for his own folly, and trotted back to his pew. Danny tried to reach him with a kick, but failed, and Sikey's eyebrows wrinkled in congratulation.

Then the minister came in, a pimply-faced young man, in proper crow-like raiment, and the service had begun. Liking his roaring voice, Homer smiled and wiggled so much that Rachel had to bounce him. All the other babies, some twenty of them, were being bounced too; and such was the rhythmic regularity with which they went up in the air and came down again all over the building, that they might as well have been toy balloons on strings.

Prayers and hymns went on nobly, quite as undisturbed by the bouncings as by the accompanying noises. These were of praiseworthy variety, for wagon-wheels scraped outside and horses whinnied and neighed; the callous-souled dogs who refused the consolations of religion and kept in the roadway snapped and fought; and, inside, the Babel was still worse, for children whispered and were corrected, or laughed and were punished, or cried and were fed; and Henny Custard, the rural free-delivery man, who was rural and free indeed, "got" unfortunate hiccoughs, going "*Eek!*" with machine-like precision and regularity; while

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Danny Shank, of Methodist proclivities, groaned out "Amen" at every, any, and no provocation.

Sikey took up his position in the middle of the centre aisle and commenced a thorough dog-toilet, cleaning his ears, munching his joints, and snuffling out burrs from between his toes. From time to time he stopped, his elbow in mid-air, and gave strict attention to the pimply minister. When this attention was not sufficiently held by the brand of eloquence offered him, he went back to his toilet, chewing himself neat with devoted care.

Over him on the ceiling was a brilliant chandelier holding four kerosene lamps, and the rope which raised and lowered it, which was fastened around a hook on the wall, was a performing wire for some eight thousand winged insects. One of the biggest of these insects, getting giddy with achievement, fell into a lamp. Soaked with loose kerosene, he soon flamed like a torch.

"Brothers and sisters," intoned the pimply young man in his most bell-like roar, "we are all journeying to Calvary. And we all must drag our cross with us. Oh, my brothers and sisters——" Just here he caught sight of the conflagration which was blackening a chimney and threatening to break it, so he turned off the bell notes and said quite

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conversationally to the sexton, "Fix that lamp, will you?"

"Eek!"

A complete cessation of service was held, while the sexton, who was young "Choe" Dusenberry, lowered the chandelier and blew out the lamp. Since this happened in his own particular zone, Sikey was charmed with the ovation, wagging his tail nineteen to the dozen, and scurrying around and around the chandelier to see if he could not discover another place needing attention. When it was raised again in air, he even made two exemplary leaps after it, keeping a pleased and expectant eye in its direction long after the sermon was on the way once more.

"Shall it not be a joy to us," boomed the minister, working himself into perspiration, and wiping frantically with a blue-bordered handkerchief over his brow, behind his ears, down his neck, and up both coat-sleeves as far as he could get, "to remember that to-night we gathered together in the good cause? Shall it not be a joy? *I ask you!*" he yelled.

Sikey looked around in anguish, hoping that someone else would have the kindness to answer, but as no one did, he obediently replied:

"Oo-woof!"

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Here Danny landed a kick which reached, and Sikey said in a totally different voice :

“ Yike ! ”

“ Eek ! ”

Bounce, bounce, bounce. And so it went on. To Georgette the scene rapidly grew into vaudeville ; but when she glanced at Rachel, she felt slightly rebuked. . For Rachel's steady face was filled with respect for the place she was in, with adoration for the Name so often invoked, and with patient toleration—with sweet pity, even—for the educational handicaps which the invokers tried to surmount.

“ Yea, it shall be a joy for ever,” went on the interminable minister.

Outside there came the sharp sound of a breaking wagon shaft, and the entire male congregation thankfully leaked into the roadway, whence whiffs of strong and consolatory tobacco soon floated.

Being able to translate sounds which were meaningless to Georgette, Rachel presently took a quiet exit with her children. Georgette finally followed.

She found the entire Dornblazer family packed into their surrey, also an alien woman with two babies.

“ Oh, Miss Verlaine, take my place if you want,”

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offered Rachel, leaning forward in a troubled way from her seat. "Mrs. Borum's buggy broke, and I thought we'd better drive her and the children right home, and then get back for you."

"Go right ahead," said Georgette accommodatingly. "I'll go inside again and see the—the service—through."

She turned to re-enter the building, when Horace, from his driver's seat, stopped her.

"Miss Verlaine."

His voice was so seldom addressed to her personally that the sound of it now impressed her oddly.

"Yes, Mr. Dornblazer." She spoke cuttingly. His "Miss Verlaine" had been too authoritative.

"Wait for me here. I shall drive back for you. Wait for me."

At his touch on the reins the horses leaped down the road, leaving her no choice except to acquiesce.

CHAPTER VII

INSTEAD of re-entering the church to hear the conclusion of the service from within, Georgette went a few steps up the road to a shambly little bridge and heard every word quite faithfully while she leaned against the railing and dreamed down into the fussing and frothing creek.

Seen from the slight distance, the meeting-house looked glitteringly and demurely pretty, like an illuminated Christmas-tree ornament, and the voices and the singing rang out into the night with an effect of inspiration and charm which at closer range was lacking.

"If this little removal adds so to its dignity," thought Georgette, as the concluding chorus of "It is well with my soul" throbbed out into the starlight, "perhaps away up in heaven," and she studied the bright vault reflectively as it was copied brokenly in the dancing stream beneath her eyes, "the sound of it may be grander than Notre Dame. Who knows? Who knows *anything* about acceptable service? Not I, for one."

The pimply young minister was as long about

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concluding as some people are about going after saying good-bye, and Georgette found herself listening for the wheels of the surrey even while Danny Shank's "amens" were still cracking and exploding from his pew.

"Sounds like a cow with colic," mused she pensively. "How rural I'm getting! What a charm I'll be on Broadway, wheat-ears in my hair, potato-bugs on the brain! And that sad French waiter at Delaro's, the one like a disinherited count or a hissed tenor—how faint and white he'll grow when I order clabber and pickled nasturtium seeds some night for supper, as I'm sure to do! H'm! Where's Horatius, I wonder?"

With a subdued exchange of civilities, the congregation at last sprinkled itself down the church steps and either walked or drove away into invisibility. Then "Choe" blew out the lanterns and locked the meeting-house door. Soon the scene belonged wholly to the starlight, the silence, and Georgette. Those who drove past her evidently thought she was waiting for some pedestrians, as those who walked by her must have thought she was waiting to be driven; at any rate, no one noticed her lonely and stranded situation.

Strain her ears as she might, she caught no sound to indicate the return of the surrey. The

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silence was so intense that it wooed some hidden frogs into a discussion of the sermon.

"Ack!" derisively said one, quite at Georgette's nervous feet.

"Wack?" asked another bad-temperedly.

There was a long pause, as if the first one was deliberating whether or not to repeat his remark.

"Wack?" persisted the bad-tempered one furiously.

"Ack," grudgingly gave in the first.

"Me to the sacred edifice," murmured Georgette, gathering her skirts around her feet. "A frog that can be seen is bad enough, but an unseen frog passes human endurance." She flew back to the church and stood rooted to its steps, not daring to move to the right or left. The white tombstones seemed to stare at her inquisitively, and a few cheap flags which had been stuck by the graves as long ago as Decoration Day signalled to her with ghostly flappings.

"Cheerful place for a tryst," she said distressfully. "When that fool finally does come, I'll be so glad to see him I'll fall all over him. And, oh goodness, here's a man walking up the road—what will he think of me?"

The apprehension with which she studied the oncomer changed gradually to recognition; it was

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only Horace, who walked with that graceful yet conscious lounge, who trod soundlessly as an Indian, yet held his head high with a stag-like independence and defiance—" hunting for trouble," as Georgette translated it.

Anger cured her feet of the fear of frogs, and she ran into the road to confront him.

" Where are the horses ? " she demanded.

He raised his hat pleasantly. His lean, determined face, with its frank bright eyes and reserved mouth, became more and more visible to her in the starlight, and, quite against her petulant will, ingratiated itself into her warm liking. " The bird of an Orlando he'd make," was her startled thought.

" The horses ? " he answered. This senseless repetition of words was an unusual trick with him, and was perhaps due to the fact that he was looking at her with a quick admiration which disconcerted his general orderliness of mind. " Why, at Crooning Water ; Black Bess went lame, and I had to unhitch her."

" What was the matter with the buckboard ? " she asked dryly.

" Bonnie Boy dislikes it. He would kick it into matchwood."

" Would he kick the buggy to matchwood too ? "

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demanded she witheringly. She had often enough seen Bonnie Boy hitched safely to the buggy, and was therefore sure of her ground.

He laughed the spontaneous musical laugh which never failed to strike with approval upon her critical ear.

"Miss Verlaine, the honest truth is that I have never had a walk with you and have often wanted it. To-night's opportunity was more than I tried to resist."

"I'm glad you didn't. That's all right," she said, mollified by his aboveboard speech into a spirit of boyish comradeship. "Why didn't you say so before? Come on."

"Have you ever noticed," he said, easily fitting his stride to hers and taking the road with her, "that what makes the night dark is an artificial light of some sort? If we had a lantern, now, we could see only a step ahead at a time; as it is, we can see for a half-mile or more."

"Rub that parable into your minister," she advised. "He needs it badly. Every time he throws light on a bit of scripture he blots it out for ever."

"I can't stand him, either," said Horace simply.

"Then why do you go to church?" she demanded.

"It sets a good example in the community."

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"Tommy-rot!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tommy-rot! For a brave man, you are the tamest thing I know."

"As, for instance——?"

"You are paying off your brother's debts, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Take my advice. Brace up and leave off."

"And why, Miss Verlaine?"

He asked the question without rancour. It seemed as though he expected, and wanted, just the answer which she gave.

"Because there is no nobility about it. It is rank foolery, amounting to absolute dishonesty to Ray and the children."

"That is rather a hard speech, Miss Verlaine, for a womanly woman."

"A womanly woman isn't making it," she said crisply. "But don't let's bandy words. To go back to you. Why did you give up college and take to farming?"

"You evidently know."

"You were a muff there too. To sacrifice self is no way to benefit another."

"Why are you saying these things?"

"To make conversation."

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"The moon is coming up," he said imperturbably.

They paused, and watched the great globe poise a moment on the horizon and then seem to lurch up behind the trees in visible bounds.

"If a scene-shifter rose it that way we'd fire him," murmured Georgette, fascinatedly watching. "Looks like a lovely cheese-pie, doesn't it, with a bite out of it?"

"You haven't much sentiment, have you, Miss Verlaine?" he questioned critically, lounging forward again.

"None to waste," she corrected. "Which leaves me with a reserve fund larger than most people's."

"I like to hear you talk," he said, half puzzled to account for that liking.

"So do I," she commented. "And there are two subjects on which I talk really well."

"One of them is?"

"The thing I know nothing about."

"Oh! And the other?"

"The thing that is none of my business."

"Go on," he permitted amiably.

She cheerfully accepted.

"All right. I will. Instead of poring and sighing over book catalogues every night, let your brother's creditors whistle awhile for their money, and buy yourself some new books."

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"You are an iconoclast," he said, pushing his hat gratefully back from his forehead, "but, by Jove, you are encouraging."

"Better let me make out your lists," she suggested. "You've got enough volumes of 'How to Squash the Cabbage Worm' as it is."

"Why, if you only would!"

He seized on the idea eagerly, and debating this book and that, they quarrelled comfortably and long.

"And now I'm tired of books," she said, shaking the whole vast subject from her. "Interlude—the shadow dance."

Extending an imaginary scarf, and tilting her head so as to keep her eyes upon her own black silhouette upon the milk-white road, she whirled through several intricate and beautiful mazes of steps, the music to which she whistled softly.

"Get out of the way," she broke off to order, as he hurried and stepped in front of her.

He stood his ground instead.

"Miss Verlaine, that's the prettiest thing I've ever seen," he admitted unreservedly, "but you'll scandalise the very scenery hereabouts, doing it on a Sunday night. The fences, even, have ears."

"Then I'll talk to them," she said with unregenerate swiftness. A stiff movement of the

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arms and head, and she typified the minister to the life. "Brother posts and sister slats," she intoned sonorously, "if you fail to drag your crosses after you, verily are ye all N. G. And as for thou, O mother Rag-bag at the organette, pipe for us a dismal melody, yea, pipe."

A droop of the neck and kink at the belt line, and she changed subtly to the limp woman at the organ, wheezing out a jerky gospel hymn. One after another, she imitated the various members of the choir. Then whipping out a make-believe plate, she passed it faithfully to each shrub and twig which branched into the roadway, "Choe" Dusenberry in every twitching muscle.

"You are dangerous," said Horace smoothly but positively. "I've got to get you off the road." He stopped at an opening in the rhododendron hedge. "Miss Verlaine, here is a short cut through the woods to Crooning Water. Will you take it?"

"A joy shall it be to us this fair night to know we have gathered together in amity and peace," gibbered Georgette, waving him into the opening and ducking in after him, "but methinks 'tis a sorry compliment to plan a walk with me and then gladly take to short cuts."

He was still laughing hopelessly at her impudent imitations, and was pushing confidently ahead

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upon the dark trail every inch of which he knew by sense of tread alone, independent of sight.

"It may be a short cut, but it is very beautiful after a while," he promised. "We'll be out of the woods soon. Then the trail runs beside the creek, which will look like fairyland with this moon on it."

As the dark breathlessness of the woods closed around her, Georgette lost her impertinent high spirits and fell into silence. The sweet-fern brushed them on the right and left, giving up faint perfume of musk and clover, and, now and again, from underfoot would steal up the spicy sigh of bruised pennyroyal, a homely, haunting fragrance.

"And smell the wild raspberries," said Horace, speaking out of the silence in perfect continuation of her own thought. "They are more real than if we could see them. I love night. I can always think more clearly and can sense things more sharply than when the world is swimming in sunlight. I love, I love the night. And you, Miss Verlaine?"

"I like to see where I'm stepping," said Georgette, thinking of frogs again, her nerves fainting. The sweet-fern which touched her hands felt as cold and frightening as the noses of wild animals, and the close trees brushed her forehead like bats. Several times she had to fight down a scream.

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Then vividly to her unseeing eyes came the sinister vision of Pauline's blazzer coiled moveless upon the trail.

She stopped. Her veins ran ice.

"Mr. Dornblazer." Her voice was shaking.

He stopped at once, and she felt him turn to her.

"Why, what is the matter?"

"I am frightened."

"I can hear you are. But of what?"

"Of snakes."

He pondered this reply a moment, gaining a complete realisation of her fear. Then he attempted reassurance.

"They are not often out at night."

"Once would be enough." Her voice broke like a child's.

"Oh, Miss Verlaine, don't!" he begged through the darkness. "Keep up your courage for a little longer, and we will be out by the creek and in the light. Shall I go on? Can you follow?"

"I can try," trembled Georgette.

He started forward again, talking encouragement to her, and she forced herself a few steps further. Then a twig moved under her foot, making a rustle in the brushwood, and a second time the remembered glitter of the evil eyes of the lurking

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snake chained her to the path. Movement became a literal impossibility.

"It is no use," she said dully, speaking with difficulty. "I am indeed frightened."

"And I hardly know how to help you," he said at length, having been thinking the thing out. "Of course, I could offer to carry you, but it would have a farcical sound. Moreover, it would be hard to do on this narrow trail; I could not protect you half so well from the brambles and branches as by walking ahead of you. If a snake *were* on the path, don't you see I'd step on it first and give you warning?"

"Oh, then you think, too, that there might be one," she cried, as if a last desperate hope had died.

"No," he said patiently, "I do not."

In the pause that followed, the night's soft voices sang to them tellingly. On the other side of the short woods the creek trickled and rippled its restless luring message, a message which finds responsive echo in the uneasy wander-lust lurking in every human heart. Above them errant breezes ran among the tree-tops. And once, mystically near, a sleepy bird trilled tenderly from a hidden bough.

"You are good not to be angry," faltered Georgette presently. "For I know just how foolish this

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is. Yet knowing, somehow, doesn't make it any better. I am not often afraid. I am afraid now, though. Really and truly. Really and truly."

The dreary childishness of the repetition was pathetically sincere, and a floating rush of odour from the sweet-fern showed that Horace had moved obedient to it.

"Here," he said authoritatively. "Take my hand, and follow. For we must go. It is as near to the creek as it would be to get back to the road. Here." She felt his hand tendered to her, and she gladly caught it in her own. He drew her gently to him. "Now, come on, dear," he urged.

The word of affection, dropped by sheerest accident, flamed up between them like a torch. And each saw into the blazing heart of the other.

He put his arm around her and held her to him.

"You are my girl, *my* girl," he said with steady conviction, "and have been from the first moment I saw you. I knew it then and have known it every moment since. But I never intended to speak. The thing spoke itself, as such things will—if they are true enough. And I am glad pretence is done with. Come to me. You are mine."

"No," cried Georgette, trying to free herself. "Let me go. I am not."

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"That is a lie," he said evenly, triumphantly. "For if you were not, being in my arms would matter but little to you, and you would not struggle so to get away. You are mine. And I will prove it to you."

With that he kissed her ; and at the kiss she put her arms around his neck, crying—

"You will hate me for this, and I will hate myself. I do it because I can't help it. Do not dare to laugh. I can't help it, I tell you. Yet everything is my fault. I planned it—for you, I mean, not for me. I thought I would keep hard and free, as I always do. No man has ever made me feel—*this*. Men fall in love with me so easily it has amused me, like a game, and I have grown into the habit of playing them like cards, interested only in the time or the trouble it would take or not take to make certain points and win the game. Indeed, I have always had a sort of contempt for men because they were such easy playthings, to take up, to throw aside——"

"You shall not throw *me* aside."

"—and I thought it was the same contempt I had for you too. For I have always been conscious of you. Day after day, lying in the hammock, ill and wretched half the time, I have watched your health and strength and have hated you for them

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—or so I thought. Wherever you have been, I have had a call to follow. And I was furious with myself. For I despise the country and country people. I do, I do ! But wherever you were, life seemed to brighten, to be worth while. You were so strong, so silent, it partly angered me, and I said to myself, ‘ I shall make him weak, make him speak, make him turn to me ; and then I shall laugh and go.’ Where would have been the harm ? Well, I have done some of it : I have made you weak, have made you speak, have made you turn to me ; but I—I am holding you fast, and I am crying.”

“ You are holding me fast because you need me, as I you. But why are you crying ? ”

“ Because this is wrong and must end.”

“ It is right. And it shall last. When I find my own, shall I not claim it ? When it comes to me, am I to turn it away ? Now that I have felt the dear warmth of you within my life, am I to go barren and cold for ever after ? This moment has belonged to me through the years, or it would not be here now. The first time I saw you, before you had seen me, when you were standing on the station platform, I knew you were the mate I should have married. You would have shown me where the top of the world was, and I would have hewn a

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way to it for both of us. I saw you were ill, and I gloried in the pride that kept you erect and masterful. I liked the way you ordered men around, and I said, 'That is as it should be—all men but me.' And when you were on the cart-seat with me, the thought wrung my heart, 'Girl, if you had come to me a few years ago, we would not be riding *down* this day, but *up*.' You filled my life from the first. I could not tear you and the hours apart. When you asked for the reins, again I said to myself; 'All men but *me*. What is given to her, she forgets: she shall remember me if only for what she does not get from me.' There were days, though, when I could have killed you, so plainly did you show your intolerance for the things that were mine, my work, my leisure, my speech, the very coat upon my back. Do you think I have not known? Many times I could not understand you. That was because I could not understand myself. But when I understood myself——"

He was exultingly silent.

"What then?" she urged passionately.

"I knew it was love we had for each other. Come out with me to where the moonlight is. I must see you. You are not afraid now?"

"No. I have forgotten fear. My hand is in yours."

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"The softness of your voice, the softness of your ways, when you are kind!"

As they walked the trail widened, taking them gradually into the open flat through which the stream raced down from the mountains, cold and crystal as a spring, the moon pouring its silver over it. Hand in hand, they followed it.

Once he stopped her, that she might the better hear its rushing murmur.

"Listen to it well," he ordered. "What it says to you to-night it will say to you for ever, a message you alone can hear, 'He loves me.' Tell me, you, what it is to say to me."

"It says, it must say, 'Good-bye'!" cried Georgette.

"You think with me it's 'kiss and sail away'?" he asked, looking at her in curiosity.

"There is nothing else to do. This moment has been a mad one. It must pass, and to-morrow we must meet as we have always met—nothing to each other."

"Nothing to each other? After this? What sort of a woman are you? Let me look," he cried, almost roughly turning her face into the moonlight. "To-night eternity has let us come into our own, and you say, 'It must pass'! That is because you have never loved—before. But you love now.

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You will learn that it is a hunger not to be denied. Your true home is here against my heart, and try to leave me though you may, you will know no peace by night or day till you come back to that home."

"*My home?*" asked Georgette lashingly. She never shirked issues, and now suddenly pulled aside a swinging branch, making disclosure of the house at Crooning Water from two windows of which there glowed lights, like guiding, guarding eyes. "*Your children's home. It is good-bye. Say it to me, and let me go. Good-bye, good-bye.*"

"To give me a moment of love so sweet that it is dearer to me than honour, whose sweetness I must and will and shall feel again, is a poor way of saying good-bye to *me*, Georgette, and you will find it so. What can part us now but death?"

"Life," she answered, flinging herself away from him.

She hurried onward. When she entered the house, its hot darkness crushed her like prison walls. Fighting the murky oppressiveness and threat of it, she ran up the flight of stairs and came without warning upon Rachel, who was standing at her own bedroom door waiting for her, real concern and tenderness in her beautiful face.

At the sudden sight of her, like a white statue

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in the light of the bedroom lamp, Georgette started and shrank.

"There! I knew the walk would be too much for you, and I told Horace so. I should have helped him put the buggy together," mourned Rachel contritely. "You are not as strong as you try to make out. Go right to your room—I've lit the lamp for you—and rest. Sleep. Here's good night to you, dear Miss Verlaine."

As Rachel bent to kiss her, Georgette flung her hands over her face where the other kisses burned and stung.

"Oh, Ray, don't, don't!" she gasped.

"How queer you act!" said Rachel, disquieted. "Has anything happened? Tell me."

From the hall below, Horace spoke up quickly, and with a heavy emphasis which held, for one listener at least, the bitterest of self-blame:

"I made her take the wood trail with me, and she encountered upon it—a snake."

"'A' snake?" cried Georgette hysterically. "Two!"

At this Rachel broke into peaceful laughter.

"Snakes are none so plentiful as that, Miss Verlaine. This morning's puff-adder evidently got on your nerves. Poor shaking child, go to sleep. Good night."

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"Good night, Ray." Georgette ran to her room and shut the door upon herself.

Rachel stared after her in affectionate worry. She waited awhile upon the landing, expecting to see Horace. Finally she leaned over the banisters and called down softly :

"Everything is shut up, Horace. Come on."

His answer was a shock to her, and was given from the distance of the open front door, where he was evidently standing.

"Ray, I won't be back to-night. I am going to saddle Bonnie Boy and ride over to—to Canadensis again to see how Jan is."

"Why, you left him feeling better!"

"Yes."

"And said you didn't have to go back!"

"I have just thought of it. Good night, Rache."

The door boomed sullenly to.

Rachel stood petrified with astonishment.

"Why, he won't get there till midnight," she told her own shadow on the wall.

"Marma!" came sleepily from the room where Pauline lay.

"Everything is all right, Pauline," said Rachel steadily. "Go to sleep again, my dearest."

"But, Marma, I want a drink."

So Rachel put a cape over her nightgown and

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crept downstairs and out to the porch pump. She could see Horace's lantern-light moving in streaks past the openings in the barn.

"Not till midnight," she cogitated again. "What makes him?" Glancing up at the window of her guest's room she noted that the light was already extinguished, and that a dark outline lay prone upon the window-sill. "She'll catch her death of cold. How loud the brook sounds! As if it spoke."

Going upstairs with the glass of water, she knelt by Pauline's bed while the child drank. A sudden shudder shook her.

Pauline noted it. "Mrs. Dusenberry says," she sleepily narrated, "'at when a person shivers and shivers and shivers all for nothing, some other person is walking over her grave. Is some walker walking over yours?"

"Maybe," whispered Rachel. She raised her head, and followed the clatter of Bonnie Boy's hoofs upon the lane, out, out to the high road. "Maybe, Pauline."

CHAPTER VIII

"JUDICIOUS sinning, in safely small doses, is a great beautifier," Georgette told herself next morning, liking her reflection in the mirror. "But I know where to stop—which is before I smash up the establishment of dear Mrs. Hayseed downstairs. So the sooner I let all parties know it, the better."

She dashed cheerily down the steps and into the kitchen, where Rachel, with a dragging gait unusual to her, was preparing breakfast.

"Ray," cried Georgette, shaking her roundly and thereby bringing back life of reassurance to her face, "I was nine kinds of a guy last night, but Richard is himself again. And isn't that your Tam O'Shanter of a husband riding back?"

The soft thud of Bonnie Boy's hoof upon the grass was heard.

"I hope so," said Rachel, brightening still more, and throwing wide the door.

"As for you," assailed Georgette, pouncing upon delighted Pauline and outstretching her upon the floor, kneeling beside her to keep her there, "this is to get even with you for saving me from the

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blazzer. Roll, goldarn yer, roll!" And the flattered Pauline spun dizzily under her hand and screamed musically every minute, to the gnawing envy of Rosine, who rushed near to watch.

Into the hurly-burly Horace stepped, his one brief greeting doing niggardly duty for everybody in the room.

"I am glad I went, Rache," he said, weariness in his tone. "Jan took a turn for the bad and we had a fight to keep him. But we did it."

"Sit down, you worn-out boy," said Rachel, her every doubt at rest. "Let me bring you something to eat."

He cast an irresolute glance at the group upon the floor. Georgette nodded up at him most casually.

"I've been telling Ray, and I'll tell you," she said, "some cheering news. That is, I came near being an idiot last night, but am sane and safe this morning."

His dark eyes flashed. "That *is* cheering news!"

The piquant, kneeling insouciance of her, plainly so irritating to him, was a source of joy to Pauline.

"How cunning and low down you look on your knees, Miss Verlaine, no bigger nan me. Do you say your prayers on your knees?"

"Mostly on the fly," confided Georgette in

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discreet undertone, her watchful eye on Rachel in the pantry.

"While you're that way, let's play church," planned Pauline eagerly. "Rosine, you lie down and bark and wag your tail like little old Sikey, and I'll nimitate the minister."

"Go ahead," incited Georgette, hoping to hear how the child's "nimitation" compared with her own of the night before.

But Rachel, overhearing, vetoed.

"Play something else, dear," she instructed mildly, over a plate of eggs. "People with sweet souls never 'play' church; and those with good hearts never imitate others."

"Have I a sweet soul and a good heart?" gloomed Pauline, evidently fearing so, and quite ready to barter them for the game.

"Yes, darling."

Hearing this fiat which plainly meant death to good times, Rosine left off yapping and waving one tail-like leg in the air, the which she had been industriously doing ever since orders.

"What do people with sweet souls and white hearts play?" demanded Pauline shortly.

"Havoc with the feelings of their friends," answered Georgette. "Let's to the porch, where we can be bad in peace."

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There her assumed lightness left her, and she withdrew herself into restless meditations.

"For *me* to run from a man!" She lashed herself angrily with the thought, conscious that Horace was able to exert a certain influence over her. "For me, after standing off two continents of them, to be 'it' in a game of tag with Piers Plowman!"

In the many days of avoidance which followed, she found it easier to escape sight of him than she had feared, for there came "haying weather," and the entire male population of the valley took to the fields. The air was filled with the sweetness of cut grass, and all the sunny hill-slopes rang musically with voices, while high-piled wagons creaked steadily down the lanes into the main roads. When a rain threatened, the women and children were called upon too, and the laughter and song of the young folks resounded cheerfully from farm to farm. The "old" folks, which meant the married ones, worked doggedly, neither laughing nor singing. To them the haying was anything but a frolic. It was a driving necessity, meaning winter sustenance for the cattle and thereby equally a sustenance for themselves. To toss hay, a pretty enough sight to the onlooker, is a wearing toil; and the sober-eyed young matrons plied their forks as incessantly as

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the men, labouring back and forth across the burning meadows. Forced to recast her snap judgment of their morals, Georgette saw that the laxity which had startled her was but a strange phase of the staunch faithfulness entailed by matrimony. Nowhere in the world were wives more chaste and devoted, doing man's labour at man's bidding, yet keeping gentle and uncomplaining.

Rachel, with four extra haying hands to provide for, cooked patiently from dawn to dusk, spreading the table with mountains of food which got cleared like chaff in a wind.

"Have haymakers seven stomachs, like camels?" Georgette asked, eyeing pies by the dozens.

"The poor fellows work so hard," Rachel explained pityingly, quite forgetful of her own efforts of preparation.

As for small Pauline, who was sent from attic to cellar, from store to field, she was literally worn haggard. Nor was Rosine young enough to escape, but was kept waddling stoically to and fro with pans to empty or pans to fill, early and late, except when she had the stern good sense to hide. And it is well for Homer that he was a baby of resourcefulness, so entirely was he left to himself for entertainment. Rachel kept him clean as a snowdrop

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and nourished to the brim, otherwise she consigned him much to solitude in strange places, dumping him into the clothes-basket, or penning him in the inverted top of the sewing-machine. Empty tubs were familiar quarters to him, and once Georgette saw him down on all fours staring silently and hopefully through the front of a new chicken coop into whose safeness he had been temporarily slatted. Such times as he was untethered he crept industriously from room to room, apt at any moment to reconnoitre around a door-jamb, like some rare house animal of exemplary muteness.

Not only did the hay clamour for attention, but all the sluggard berries which had unripenely dallied through June, made up their minds to mature in a bunch; and currants reddened, gooseberries browned, and huckleberries blued, all in riotous unity, entailing a fearful amount of picking and canning.

"And Horace is working himself thin," discovered Rachel. "He looks ill. Have you noticed, Miss Verlaine?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think he looks worried and queer?"

"Yes."

"What do you suppose can be the matter with him?"

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"It—it would be hard to tell."

"He needs rest."

"How about you, Ray?"

"Why, I do rest, at night. But Horry goes to his room and reads and reads. Often, when I wake, I can hear him walking up and down till it gets me frightened. I wish you'd speak to him."

"I?"

"Yes. If you don't mind. Men are apt to take as gospel from someone else the very advice they pooh-pooh from home-folks."

"What do you want me to say to him?"

"Tell him not to be so conscientious, to take a vacation from duties for a while, to sort of stop considering me and the children——"

"I will not," broke in Georgette sharply. Then, to disarm Rachel's surprise, "Tell him yourself, Ray."

"I've tried. But he's irritable and nervous lately," confessed Rachel wistfully.

"And you are afraid of him," finished Georgette. "So am I!"

"Are you going huckleberrying with us tomorrow?" asked Rachel, passing easily from the one domestic problem to the other.

"Indeed—I—am—NOT!" exploded Georgette, who had been beguiled once into a similar excursion

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and had not yet recovered from the sunburned horror of it. Berryng ranked with haymaking in points of imperativeness and discomfort.

"Then if I set out your lunch, Miss Verlaine, you won't mind waiting on yourself? We'll be gone all day."

"Where do you go for huckleberries? Alaska?"

"To Bald-top Hill, eight miles from here."

"Eight miles for a huckleberry!"

"Oh, the road's good. Horry'll get us there in less than two hours."

"You people hustle all summer to live through the winter; and we people hustle all winter to live through the summer, yet Washington, D.C., makes the same bunch of laws to guide us all," moralised Georgette. "I dare say the angels up in heaven are splitting their sides laughing over the whole business. Here's Pauline, so I'll exclaim for you, Ray. 'Oh, Miss Verlaine'!"

"I didn't know angels had sides, 'cause their wings grow out of their necks," said Pauline, speaking by the Christmas card.

"It depends upon the angel's profession," explained Georgette. "In mine, some 'angels' have so much 'side' there's no standing it."

"Huh?" blinked Pauline.

"Miss Verlaine!" shuddered Rachel. "Don't

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you think you sometimes let your sense of fun run away with you ? ”

“ Good thing. People who stick to seriousness never go far.”

“ But they are the first to get back home,” contended Rachel.

“ Home’s something I’ve never had and never will have ; it matters to nobody how far *I* go afield.”

“ ‘ Mr. Right ’ will be around some day,” said Rachel with lumbering archness. “ *He*’ll show you where your home is, and when he does, you take it, Miss Verlaine, career or no. You take it ! ”

“ Ray, let me tell you something,” said Gergette, starting to leave the room and hurling her remark from the door. “ A really good woman, who knows no bad, can say things more shocking to the morals of a community than imported vaudeville. Incidentally, to-morrow morning I’m going to sleep till noon, so go Bald-topping as early as you like, and don’t save breakfast for me.”

But, next morning, the silence in the deserted house awakened her more abidingly than its wonted noises could have done, and after she had lonesomely foraged for bread and milk and choked it down in dejection, she found herself facing the long day at an hour far earlier than her wonted one.

“ I never thought I’d miss the children so,” she

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mused. "No ribbons, sashes, or shoe-strings to tie, Othello's occupation's gone. This is a good chance to go down to the bottom of my trunk," she informed herself drearily. "I've never been there since May."

As she progressed in this pursuit, her mercurial spirits began to rise with the unearthing of unexpected odds and ends of dainty dress. The things appealed to her as new, and when the appeal was very strong, she tried the garment on. By the time, though, that she had disentombed and donned a silk lounging-gown, barbarous and beautiful with gold embroidery, she found a package which put clothes entirely out of her head.

For among her mail, which had arrived just before she had taken the train for Crooning Water, and which Cora had thrown wildly into the trunk—mostly cards, bills, and invitations—was a manuscript copy of the play "Zarna" which was then taking Europe by storm. Duff, her manager, had sent it with this note :

"Read it. It's what Xenia Ketrodoff is playing, and for all there is in it. Hottest stuff that has been seen for a century.

"Read! And agree with me that there isn't a skirt on this side of the pond can come within a

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thousand miles of playing it. It's me to import the Ketrodoff and make my glittering pile.

"Yours, all to the marmalade,

"D. D."

Curled up on the floor, an exotic and brilliant picture in her bizarre gown, Georgette fascinatedly read the play through. Then she went back to the beginning and read it through again.

"Duff's about right," she admitted grudgingly. "None of us could touch it with a ten-foot pole. But, Hopping Hiram, how I'd like to!"

Having a lightning study, she soon memorised the words, and by noon had worked out Zarna's psychology and had clearly conceived a characterisation.

"Not only is it hot stuff, Duff, but hungry stuff," she informed the atmosphere, as, stiff and famished, she got up and went creeping down to the desolate kitchen in search of lunch.

Swallowing swiftly, she was soon up in her room again, acting scene after scene to herself, gaining weird mesmeric help from her acting ancestors, till there were times when she well knew she had come very near indeed to what Duff claimed was impossible.

Finally reaching saturation point, she shook the

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whole thing from her, and, in a state of elated exhaustion, she sat on the floor beside her low window-sill, her happy head resting upon it, and gave herself over to warm dreams of success—or tried to—but insidiously, only half heard at first, then clearer and clearer, there came to her ears the insistent, subtle, secret message of Crooning Water. So still was the farm, its ordinary noises stopped, that the brook seemed magically loud and near.

And its message was so poignantly defined! Trickling, purling, purring, crooning from rock to rock, rippling from bend to bend, its restless flow sang the song entrusted to it, so that the hay-scented air caught the words, taught it to the rustling leaves and waving branches, till all the myriad voices of throbbing, perfumed summer took them up in dreamy choral—"He loves you."

Stage, orchestra, footlight, paint and patches, tawdriness and sham, applauding people—all died from her inner vision, and the wide world narrowed down to one sturdy agrarian, brown-handed with toil, but with the keen eyes and lean jaws of the student and thinker.

When conjured into her thought, his image always so dominated it that his visible presence hardly seemed more real. Kneeling there by the window, she visualised him so completely that her

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senses took no warning account of the faint fragrance of cigar smoke which curled lazily upward, a masculine incense which seemed to fit naturally with the incantation scene going on in her mind, to the cadence of Crooning Water's song.

Even his voice failed at first to startle, coming to her ears with the dogmatic resonance which as often angered as thrilled her.

"Come down, Miss Verlaine. I must speak with you."

She never lifted her head, but knew that he was standing beneath her window, and her heart pounded suffocatingly till she heard the audible beat of it. The summons came again.

"I said come down, Miss Verlaine. I must speak with you."

Confusedly obedient, she jumped up, piled her hair into some semblance of order, went through the extravagant characteristic of washing her dusty small palms in cologne and attempting to cool her dream-flushed cheeks in it, then stole from her room, half aflame to meet him, half coldly unconsenting.

While slipping with the reluctance of a shadow from stair to stair, she heard him striding across the rooms below and into his library.

She found him standing beside his shelves of

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books, and some of the most familiar volumes he kept taking up and examining with curious intentness, as if they had been odd bric-à-brac in a strange man's house, seen now for the first time.

"What wind blew you from Bald-top?" she asked with nervous flippancy.

As complete silence continued, she found some sort of an answer for herself by glancing through the window and seeing Bonnie Boy, saddleless but bridled, tied to the gate at the end of the grape-arbour, his high head drooping slightly as if worn with weariness.

"Well," she went on sharply. "Say what you have to say. Or did you call me down just to look at me?"

"No!" he answered with his maddening positiveness. "Though the beauty of you, as you stand there, would make excuse for it. Your eyes are always bewildering and star-gleaming, and I get dazzled in the mesh of them; it takes me a moment or so to collect my words. And that is the oddest, loveliest dress I ever saw."

He leaned his elbow on a bookshelf and rested his head upon his hand, looking determinedly down, as though to exclude her while he got his thoughts together.

"Well," he said finally, looking up—and the

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white weariness of his face, haggard with the pain of an unwon fight, struck accusingly at her heart. "I have tried to reason myself back to sanity, but have failed. It was hard enough to keep you out of my mind before—before——"

While hesitating for words, he expressed them wholly by his action, for in slow remembrance he seemed again to fold her in his arms and hold her against his breast. Her face, already softly flushed, deepened distressfully.

"*Since,*" he went on, "it has grown impossible. You are a part of my whole life. Whether I am working in the fields, or walking this lonely floor at night, or standing at dawn beneath your window, I seem to hold your hand in mine, to talk to you, to hear you talk. If I do not know where you are, I am in a frenzy of unrest, but as soon as I hear you come into the house, even though I know I will not see you, peace comes to me. This sums it all—I love you and must have you. Wait. Don't speak yet. I have a question to ask you; have you succeeded in making me nothing to you?"

Aware suddenly of the insufferable heat of the room, she went to the door-like French window, which she had opened on the night of the storm, and again flung it wide. And, as if she had thereby turned the key which started a music-box, there

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came in on the summer breeze the song of Crooning Water—the song that would go on for ever, by night, by day, in rain, in sun, for life, through death.

Receiving no answer, he put his question again.

“Have you succeeded in making me nothing to you?”

Two butterflies flew into the room, playing their glittering aerial game of hide-and-seek, over, under, circling, wheeling, darting, following, seeking always the sunshine and the flowers. When they had fluttered out again, the question came a third time, threatening to echo to eternity till answered.

“Have you succeeded in making me nothing to you?”

“I think of you always,” she replied. “And you know it.”

The pain deepened on his face, and again he leaned his head upon his hand.

“I am going away, at once,” she continued vehemently. “To New York.”

“I shall follow and find you.”

“No!”

“I shall follow and find you.”

“Don’t,” she pleaded. “It is because I love you that I must go.”

“I shall follow and find you. And when I follow, when I find you, I shall be free to offer you——”

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He opened his arms, stretched them towards her, then dropped them wordlessly by his side. "For I shall have told to——" And again he was dumb, unable to bring Rachel's name to his betraying, suffering lips—Rachel, limpid-eyed, faithful, with the gentle bosom of a Madonna against which a baby was always resting. Horace followed this picture reverently till it faded from the unworthy shrine of his mind. "I shall have told—her—everything."

"Oh, no! Not—not——" Georgette wrung her hands helplessly, unable to deny to herself the full meaning of his words. Her stammer died into silence, but her eyes, as she held them on him, mirrored dramatically the whole sordid tragedy to come—the insulted, tortured wife, the deserted children, the betrayed home, the travesty of divorce.

Evading nothing of the truth, he showed his sorrow at the terrible inevitableness of it by folding his arms upon the shelf and hiding his stricken face within them. So might a general have stood, the victor of a desired vantage-point, won by the blood and lives of those who had enlisted under his banner.

"It simply shall not be," whispered Georgette. "I am going now, now! And you are to stay where you belong."

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As she started to pass him on her quick way to the door, he caught her by the two wrists.

"Where I belong? Yes. And where is that? You know. And you shall tell me."

"Don't be rough!" flamed Georgette, the ignoble banality of her expression adding to her rising temper.

He tightened his grasp. "Say that you never want to see me again, and I'll stay here," he promised, his eyes blazing to match her own anger.

Whatever answer was on her lips, it died when she noted the boyish delight and relief which brightened his young face as he heard, evidently for the first time, the low, pulsing murmur of Crooning Water.

Hearing, he defied her.

"Say that you never want to see me again!" he triumphed.

A second time within the brief half-hour she recognised the absolutely unconquerable persistence of his questioning, and she wrenched one hand free, striking the mouth that knew how to master her, striking with the hate that only love can bring, the love that made her kiss it passionately afterwards, as she whispered:

"Horace, I can't say it, I can't say it!"

CHAPTER IX

AFFECTIONATE concern overcame Rachel when Georgette told her she was going.

"Before the tomatoes are ripe!" was her culminating attempt at dissuasion.

"One or two may be left in the city for me," comforted Georgette. "Advanced from next year. We'd finished this year's tomatoes before I came down. I'm going up the lane now to give two wires to the mailman."

The telegraph system was rare. People gave their rush wires to Henny Custard in the morning, who, after circling the county with them till arriving back at his starting-point, Creston, in the afternoon, handed the message to the operator, after the office was closed, and the operator sent the wire the next morning. The reply, which might come in an hour, was carefully sealed in an envelope and sent faithfully over to the post office to await Henny Custard on the day still following, and Henny delivered it before that night—if he remembered. And if he forgot, he was a good chap, and generally managed to hand it to the weekly butcher to deliver.

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The daily walk up the lane, either to meet Henny or to take from the mail-box his contributions to it, was always a source of interest to Georgette. She enjoyed seeing the country folk riskily "posting" their outward-bound letters in the "tin frankfurters on stilts," as she termed the rural receptacle.

"After they've hung out the red tag, like the tongue of a thirsty pup, and gone away, how do they know whether Henny gets the letter or a cow?" she often wondered.

This morning she reached the end of the lane in good time, and sat in the grass to write her messages, hearing Henny Custard's "Whoa! *back!*" some reassuring quarter-mile to the good, and knowing she had consequently plenty of time for composition.

Henny Custard's famished horse always saw a tempting bunch of grass a step ahead at the very moment when Henny was balancing out of his buggy to deposit mail, and Henny's exasperated "Whoa! *back!*" was a thing to cleave the startled skies. For Henny was so good-natured a lump that he had to roar fiercely at man and beast before either took him seriously.

As the "Whoa! *back!*" came nearer and nearer, Georgette scribbled to Cora:

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"Find suitable apartments in good neighbourhood and have them ready Monday."

"And woe betide you, Cora, if I don't see them full of roses, white hyacinth, and maidenhair fern."

Her second message read :

"Meet me Monday at Hoboken, train number three out of Creston."

This she addressed to Dr. John Congdon, then scrambled upright to smile at the pleased Henny, who drove alongside, pulled up, leaned back against his seat, and appeared genially ready to converse till midnight, mail regulations or no mail regulations. His voice roared out like a dynamite blast, all but shivering the surrounding acres :

"How y' are, Miss Verlaine ? "

His round, blue, wind-blown eyes in his sunburned, colossal face rested on her contentedly. It was not often the lanes yielded him up anything so modish. She evidently pleased him better than the cover of a new seed catalogue.

"All right, Henny ! and your own self ? "

"Nuthin' never the matter with me," he howled optimistically, though, for a matter of fact, he was generally riding around with injuries which would have kept two lesser men in bed, being four days

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out of seven be-ragged in a liniment-soaked handkerchief, the ends of which poked up from some portion of his extremities like ears of rabbits.

"Oh, *this*?" he'd yell rememberingly, when some such place was pointed out to him. "I jagged me there with th' axe, right smart," pulling down the edge of a gory rag to renew acquaintance with a gash which laid open the bone.

Or "That?" and he would poke up a forgotten foot swollen several times its allowable size. "Jumped on a pitchfork."

"If nothing's ever the matter," now inquired Georgette, "why waste all that bread and milk?"

"Oh," searching for the poulticed finger till he found it, a thing like a ham-bone and inflamed to as rich a red. "Fool snake bit that, me a-hunting under the barn floor for eggs."

"What did the doctor say?" shuddered Georgette.

"Why, I wouldn't take just *one* finger to no doc," bellowed Henny, amazed. "I soaked it up good in horse lotion." He next carefully read the private wires in his unmaimed hand. "My! Naw!" he opposed vehemently, "yer hain't a-figurin' on goin', hey?"

Georgette sweetly talked it through with him; then, as he gathered his lax lines, she suddenly

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took back one of her wires and changed the address. For "Dr. John Congdon" she substituted "Yes Smith."

"Because, you see," she explained, happily at her usual trick of using the strict truth to bluff people into a state of doubt, "there's no fun after all in asking John, for he'd be sure as death to come, but Yes will keep me guessing and contented the whole journey there. Don't let me detain you any longer, Hen."

"I'd as leaf sot as jog," he boomed politely. "Git up, *you* Pet!" And to recover lost time he belaboured his poor "Pet" for as far down the road as Georgette could hear and see him. "You Pet!" Whack! "G'up, Pet!" Swish!

"If that's being someone's pet, keep me from it," devoutly wished Georgette, wandering back to Crooning Water with a slim mail consisting solely of the weekly paper, from the folds of which she carefully shook one of Henny's discarded thumb-stalls.

"But 'Pet' 's her *name*," explained Rachel earnestly, when Georgette was trying to enthuse her into admiration over the contrast between Henny's word and act.

"And yours should be 'Punch,'" exploded Georgette. "You Jokeless Joke!"

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"I know I'm not a bit funny," confessed Rachel uneasily. "None of us are. That is why we will miss you so, Miss Verlaine. The house will sound emptier than the cage of a dead bird. None of us, not even the children, run downstairs but you ; we all walk. And we don't laugh. I wish we did. Why, lots of rainy days, Miss Verlaine, when you've laughed suddenly from somewhere, I've looked up quick from my work to see if it was the sun had come out. Even when you were the most ill, you would smile and joke, till it truly won the heart out of me. I can't bear to see you gathering up your things and packing them."

For Georgette was a sociable spreader, apt to have her hats on the family hooks, her scraps of lace on the lawn grass, her book in the hammock, her perfumed scarfs on chair-backs, and the trait entailed a great deal of retrieving when she was ready to leave a place. It also caused her absence to be lonesomely noticed.

Sport, who had all of a dog's mournful conception of a coming departure, took to stalking at Georgette's heels, objecting horribly to her wasteful wanderings, but accompanying her faithfully from room to room, from floor to floor, although going upstairs was something he hated even worse than chasing hens from the tomato patch. When he

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saw her, her arms full of personal garments, go flying up the steps to her own room, he'd gaze after her with a heart-bursting sneeze, and then shamble clawingly after her, as often as not tumbling back a few stairs in midflight, which meant much scraping of toe-nails and rattling of bones, and sounded like the accidental overthrow of a meat counter. His weakness was not senility, nor laziness, nor was it anything organic, being purely a mental attitude of opposition to humanity's unnecessary activity. Had a woodcock been flying upstairs, Sport could have started after it late and still have met it at the landing.

The trunk packed, a new complication darkened in Rachel's hazel eyes.

"Horry says that Dietrich Van Vliet will have to haul it up to Creston for you, that both our horses need shoeing and can't be taken from the barn," she repeated faithfully, but plainly worried over an equine thriftlessness new to her experience. "Then Deet'll come back and drive *you* over."

Dietrich Van Vliet was Mrs. Dusenberry's cousin, and he was country-bred to perfection, which means that he left the country for the city at every job which offered, coming back to nature only when his pay stopped. His solid Dutch ancestry had had its inevitable effect of making him airily

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American in his contempt for it. He felt himself to be a cosmopolitan young man, which impressed his associates, but made him a big nuisance to city people.

"Deet, he iss such a gay young feller sso much," Mrs. Dusenberry used to say, her delicate old face alight with hospitality when she was called upon to welcome Dietrich into her house—he having "been fired again already"—"that I'm neffer so glad to see anybotty yet as him." Then, with a gentle explanation which was so peacefully literal as to carry no unkindness, "Except to have him go 'vay vunce more, for Deet, he grows unsatisfactoried pretty soon yet, here down."

So Dietrich Van Vliet had hauled away the trunk, and, while waiting his return for herself, Georgette, back in her grey loveliness of travelling gown and enduring the rare stylishness of gloves, was trying to reconcile the troubled children to her departure.

"This is for you," Pauline said, her sensitive lips trembling and her capable little fingers bungling emotionally as she fastened "this" into Georgette's silk buttonhole. It was a child's abominable bouquet of short-stemmed flowers, of colours so diverse that each loudly cursed the other.

"Thank you," said Georgette gravely.

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"Don't go," panted Rosine, becoming vocal. "Don't go. I—I—love you."

Round and soft and pretty though she was, Rosine at that moment was the pale copy of her father. If she had tears to weep, no one should see them. She stood tragically cold and quiet of body, but with her great eyes flashing, and her stubborn beautiful mouth set in lines of pain and pride.

"Ah, but I must go," explained Georgette, her breath catching suddenly as the likeness lashed her. "I've been here too long as it is."

"Indeed, Miss Verlaine, you are not to say such a thing even in politeness," said Rachel affectionately. "I wish you'd stay as long again. The day you came is a very bright one in my thoughts, and I shall always feel thankful for having known you. And this afternoon—with you gone," her calm voice broke, "I am going to be lonely and unhappy."

"Oh, I've got something for Sport," remembered Georgette vivaciously, racing upstairs to get it. She came back with Congdon's sweater. "Come here, Sportless," she coaxed the hound at once to her side, "and let me put it on you."

And to the goggle-eyed remonstrance of Sport, and the diverted entertainment of the children, Georgette forced the dog's stiff fore legs into the sleeves of the garment, pulled his head through its

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neck, and with the artistic thoroughness of a careful tailor who had a reputation to keep up, fitted the sweater along Sport's shrinking, wincing, astounded body till it conformed to his shape as if made for him. In its penitentiary stripes his gaunt face bore a haunted resemblance to an escaped convict's.

While Pauline and Rosine cackled with laughter, Rachel's gaze sympathised with the outraged animal as he slunk to hiding.

"How could you, Miss Verlaine?" she remonstrated, smiling. "He hates to be made fun of by people he likes."

"Sport isn't the one I'm insulting," explained Georgette. "It's John."

Cheering up the children, thwarting Rachel's attempts to be loving, Georgette arduously filled in the time of waiting, and the thought that was uppermost in her mind finally resolved itself into words, made as casual-sounding as possible:

"Ray, take my good-byes to Horace. Where is he?"

Rachel's face flushed softly with apology. "I can't tell any more than you can, Miss Verlaine, why he isn't here to say good-bye to you himself. He's never been impolite like this, but he said he just had to see Kaufmann about the timber. To come

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right out with the truth, Miss Verlaine, I rather think Horry so hates having you leave that he runs away from seeing it. Men are often queer like that. He made me so surprised ! But when they get high and mighty fits on them, and say they *have* to go places, you only send them off sooner and further by talking, so I kept quiet. There's never any use trying to make a man feel ashamed by telling him he acts shameful."

"No, that just hurries them forward," agreed Georgette sympathetically. "But don't worry about it, Ray. My feelings are not hurt. Really."

"Oh, I don't think you care about us half as much as we about you," cried Rachel, giving way suddenly when she saw Dietrich driving in. She folded the girl warmly, but with awkward reserve, in her friendly arms, whispering: "Don't forget us, don't forget us. Good-bye."

"Good-bye!" sung Georgette cheerily, with a hug here and a kiss there and a smile on all. "Say good-bye, Rosine!"

"Willn't," said Rosine, a world of love in her stoical face.

"Marma," shrieked Pauline in a new astonishment. "Homer's talking! Homer's talking!"

"Never!" denied Georgette vehemently, turning

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to examine him where he sat in his high-chair, dithering and kicking and accepting fate as usual. "I dare you to speak," kneeling before him, "I dare you, Homer!"

"*Verlaine!*" said the baby, stretching out his arms to be delivered. "*Verlaine!*" The name came clearly and pleadingly.

Georgette dropped her head into his soft white lap and broke into an uncontrollable heart-breaking crying, for which she could give no reason, her low sobs sounding like the weeping of a frightened child in the dark. As Homer's fists dabbed wonderingly at her, she held and kissed them.

"Don't, Miss Verlaine," remonstrated Rachel, raising her gently. "Crying's bad for you. What is it, dear?"

"I hardly know, Ray, except," getting flippant as a means of recovery, "it's awful to hear one so young saying a bad word."

"I should think you'd like it," pondered Rachel. "I'd give anything if he'd said my name."

"And I," cried Georgette, in tears again.

Dietrich Van Vliet, carrying out the pearl-coloured suit-case, grinned from ear to ear, saying in sprightly warning:

"We've none too much time for waterworks."

So Rachel caught up radiant young Homer in

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her firm arms, and the porch quartette which had welcomed Georgette to Crooning Water with smiles now sadly waved her a farewell.

Whipping up Dusenberry's horse, Dietrich Van Vliet proceeded to make the ride agreeable.

"Going away?" he asked inanely.

"Why, no," countered Georgette. "Arriving back."

After pondering this a quarter of a mile, Dietrich burst into a chuckle and dug her approvingly with his elbow. Hoping that his action was but a muscular contraction like epilepsy, occurring not oftener than once in twenty-hours hours, Georgette refused to chide it. An hour would end him.

"I was thick, wasn't I?" he advanced genially. "It ain't often a fault of mine. It's the way I feel, down this part of the world, thick. Ever feel it? —as if you'd been drinkin' when you knew you hadn't?"

"No-o," balanced Georgette adaptably. "Though I've felt as though I'd like to drink when I knew I couldn't. Isn't that as bad?"

Dietrich pondered for another quarter of a mile, then broke into a louder chuckle and dug her with a deeper approval.

"Worse!" he answered delightedly. "Actresses were plainly all they were cracked up to be."

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Georgette put her hands on the reins to attract his attention.

"Deet," she advanced smoothly.

"Ches?" he asked, thinking that "yes" was humorous and endearing when pronounced that way.

"Touch me again and I'll cut you across the face with the whip."

He pondered this carefully for full half a mile, then burst into another chuckle, raising the approving elbow in readiness.

Before the dig could fall, she had the whip in her hand and had turned upon him with a look which made him beg warningly:

"Whoap there!"

Cutting the chuckle off for good and all, he gazed wildly about him for a safeguard, saw the suit-case, picked it up and rammed it protectingly home between them on the seat. Then he gave his whole attention to driving up the steep grade.

Looking around her in peace, Georgette waited confidently for Horace to ride from some cross road and speed her upon her way by at least a word. To be sure, Kaufmann's was in the opposite direction—but had he gone to Kaufmann's?

The valley lay lower and lower beneath her, and Crooning Water had welded itself softly among hidden distances, so that she could no longer pick

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out the place where it greenly nestled. And summer was over, calendar or no calendar. True, the corn waved verdantly in the fields, most of it as yet unripened ; but the smell of mellow apples tanged the air, and " bouncing Bet " was raggedly whitening the roadsides—an unfailing sign that fall's yellow finger, the goldenrod, was very soon to follow. The cheerful robin had been silent for many a week, and had left off tugging reluctant worms from the grass, though he still disputed choice boughs with the orioles ; nothing but the hauntingly dismal " Phe—be ! Phe—be ! " sounded through the heavy air.

And to the Phebe-bird's untamed, longing cry her restless heart echoed " Horace, Horace ! "

It seemed unbelievable that the long road would not give him to her for at least the brief moment of her desire. And how he had managed to fill her life full with his thoughts ! The very rocks echoed him : " We'd be riding *up*, my girl, not down." As the wheels grated the bank and crushed a frond of branching sweet-fern, its warm, wafting sweetness cast a swift spell over her willing senses, and the lonely day changed suddenly into the memory of that soft, dark night—in the wood trail—among the rhododendrons—when he had been there, there—beside her—not——

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"Oh," she thought shudderingly, "I'm in love like a milkmaid, and it's horrible."

Then her feelings escaped restraint again and leaped exultingly when she caught sight on the road ahead of a figure which seemed to walk familiarly. Overtaking the man, however, George astonished his pronounced rusticity by leaning out of the buggy and remarking scourgily :

"You didn't know enough to be somebody else, did you?"

Finally, to Dietrich, who drove her to the station platform and looked warily at her, in invitation for her to get out as soon as might be :

"A lovely ride, Deet. Thanks."

Even while buying her ticket and checking her trunk, and afterwards while standing on the platform waiting the approaching train, she could not shake her fancy free from the haunting thought that the man in her mind was as near in actuality, and her eyes sought him with many an oblique hungering glance.

The station-master, bustling past, happened to flit by her just as he had flitted on that particular spot over a quarter of a year ago. He stopped in obedience to some spiritual restraint and threw her a gentle stare. Then, following the odd associations of the human brain, that never forgets

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anything, though the human himself may, he flickered the same questioning glance at her feet. Yes, they were there—those jewelled grey *suède* shoes.

“Why, hullo!” he said, looking up into her face with delighted recognition.

“Hullo,” she smiled.

“Got there all right?” he inquired helpfully of her three-months’-old attempt.

“Yes, thank you,” she politely reassured him.

“Well, that’s good,” he said, hurrying off.

Ten years from then, should she meet him in Baffin’s Bay or Pekin, he would be her warm personal friend. This she knew well. But to account for the lasting impressions she made upon the kindness of humanity was beyond her psychological power. Moreover, the train was there.

As she got on board, the searching look she threw her chance companions showed that her fancy about Horace died hard. Nor did she succeed in really killing her hope till Creston was at the end of the track instead of the beginning. Then she frowningly informed herself:

“The most annoying men in the world are those who act like gentlemen when you’d rather they wouldn’t.”

CHAPTER X

WHILE the train was crawling to its final standstill, Georgette saw by the lurid posters of "Ketrodoff!" that her manager had realised the heights of his desire, and that his "glittering pile" was to start its growth that very evening.

"Good for Demmy," she said to herself, Duff's first name being outrageously Demetrius. "But bad indeed for yours truly. With a star like Xenia Ketrodoff twinkling in his front yard, it will be hard to make him see a bit of dust from the Milky Way like me. And there's Cora."

"Ah, the pleasure to welcome you, ma'm'selle," beamed the maid.

"Now I know I'm young again," commented Georgette. "You madame'd me at parting. Where do I live, Cora?"

Cora graphically illustrated the new quarters to Georgette's entire satisfaction.

"Take my things there," said she dismissively.

For bearing leisurely in her direction was the long-coated, conspicuous-looking Yes Smith. She studied him invitationally till he finally arrived beside her.

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"Well, George?" he temporised, leaving the real initiative to her, as was his cool custom with everybody, he being too rich and important to need to make first moves of any sort.

"Maybe so," was her reply. She was as unimpressed as he, and he plainly chafed to note it. "Don't hurry me," she went on. "Give me all the joys of recognition." She looked him over.

Size and equipment made him of distinguished appearance, and his visible freedom from conventional moralities gave him the assured poise and balance of respectability which is always forfeited by the dissipation which occasionally harks back to reform and the ravage of regrets. His face and figure were full, but were saved from being heavily coarse by reason of perfect health—a good circulation having indubitable advantages over mere good conscience as a human beautifier. His hands were the fat white members which usually belong to a retired tenor, which he was not, rather than to a suspended horseman, which he was; and his eyes, though sated with the delight of life to the point of calmness, were not in the least tired, but looked keenly ready for anything that was expected of them.

"You find me the same?" he inquired sarcastically, not afraid of scrutiny, owning too many

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merits, if only those of cloth, linen, and valuable stones.

"A trifle the samer," acknowledged she, not wholly in compliment. At last, "How do you do?" she asked, extending a cool hand.

He too put out his hand, but he used it to bear hers down and back to its place against her dress. This accomplished, he laid his other hand quietly upon her shoulder, asked, "Why waste time by going back to before the place where we left off?" and kissed her.

"What a place for us to leave off!" criticised Georgette. "Am I to follow you? Or are you gone?" This as he started to move away.

"Neither. You are to be by my side, I hope," with affectation of deference which came so near being the real article as to deceive even himself. "Just a step to my car, George."

It was showily near. With its two liveried men, its array of brass, its potted palm, its polished doors and balustraded top, all it needed was a lobby and an elevator to turn it quite into a hotel. Georgette stepped thankfully into the comforts of its huge interior. Yes Smith took his place beside her. When they had started off, the enormous car sliding as softly as balls on a pool table, he twisted so as to face her. No man who expected a

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knife-thrust in the back ever took more pains to confront his companions than did Yes Smith. By virtue of this wary habit he was in position to note their every glance and to make his own deductions therefrom.

He stared at her thoughtfully for a long time.

"What's your game, George?" he asked eventually, with unvexed softness.

"Having you meet me?"

"*Asking* me. For I intended not to come."

She laughed with quiet enjoyment; and again he chafed at her equal unconcern.

"I felt uncertain about you too," she answered.

"Which replies to your question about my game."

After a few minutes' brooding he asked, "You mean I am a gamble with you?"

"Exactly. I never know what you'll do. And I never care. I just want to find out. When I'm interested, you bore me; but when I'm bored, I find you interesting."

"You were bored in the country?"

"Odd times."

"And in one of the oddest you sent me the message?" His voice betrayed anger, less towards her than himself. "I don't know whether to make you glad you sent it, or gradually sorry."

She smiled, sincerely appreciating the way he

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was coming up to her requirements of him. "Take me to dinner, Yes, and arrive at decision between the courses."

"Dinner, George?" He frowned at his watch. The hour and not the deed dismayed him.

"I breakfasted last May," she reminded him.

"Good lord, poor girl!" his commiseration was assent.

"Fix the place, take me home, give me half an hour to dress, a half-hour more to join you, and let the rest take care of itself," she arranged.

"I'll have my car remain at your door," he tried as an amendment.

"You won't. Do you think I'd miss that walk up Broadway?"

Having had previous Thespian insight let in upon his experiences, he came to the same conclusion that he did not.

"In an hour then," was his farewell. His cool stare favoured her choice of residence. Cora had done well indeed.

"Less," she promised, famished.

"An hour," he insisted. "I'd sooner put expectancy off than be kept waiting a half-second, even by you."

"Cora, you devoted and underpaid angel," was Georgette's tribute, after she had made admiring

off all the electric attachments just to get the balm of the various clicks into her long-exiled ear, "you did wonders, as you always do. There is the dear old piano, bless it! And now make me presentable, if you can."

Cora was not afraid to promise. "La, la, la, to let the pretty hands so go!" she deplored, reaching frantically for manicuring unguents.

"The comfort you are, always knowing your lines!" beamed Georgette, while the pleased maid deftly worked. "And you dress your part so well," commending the blackness of the garb of service, and the whiteness of its collar, cuffs, and apron. "You could go into the back of a monthly magazine and sell vacuum cleaners, just as you are. But you mustn't, Cora; I need you."

A magic half-hour later:

"There then!" exploded Cora, leading her to the long pier glass in the parlour for her to get a full-length portrait view of herself in a divinely new white and tan gown.

Out in the turmoil and crash of her adored city, Georgette grew more and more radiant, her happy recognitions of friends showering right and left. The very beggars smiled a welcome.

"Been gone, ain't yer, lady?" asked a sickly

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young woman who presumably sold shoe-strings. "It's been crool hot. I'm glad yer missed it."

"Here," said Georgette, emptying half her purse into the other's hand. "Go home and lie down. You look done up."

Further along, she found herself suddenly wound in the embrace of little Maisie Delorme, a frantically admiring chorus girl, who had a reputation for being fast just because her feet were, they having won their celerity and speed, though, from dancing a life's attendance upon a bedridden mother.

"Steady! What's doing?" smiled Georgette, freeing herself.

"Oh, what's ever doing but jolts?" flamed Maisie, with a stamp of despair. "Haven't I prayed all my life for a speaking job? And now that Bernstein's thrown one at me (four whole sides! Think of it, Miss Verlaine, four whole sides!), don't I have to throw it back with a 'No, thanks'?"

"Why?" asked Georgette, as the girl stamped again to intimidate the tears which threatened to fall.

"Because it's an opening in stock, and calls for three or more different duds every week in the season. I don't own a rag. Not a rag, tag, rat, belt, nor buckle! So it's good-bye to the job, try the next doorbell."

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"No, it is not," said Georgette. "I'm storing two trunks of wardrobe I haven't needed for years. Call them yours, Maisie."

It took her some time to convince the girl of the seriousness of the gift. Convinced, Maisie wept in open earnest—wept and praised her patron.

"Oh, don't thank me for giving you something I don't want," Georgette said, wincing honestly. "See this yellow rose in my jacket? Well, I happen to feel the need of it there, and if you went down on your knees for it, I'd deny you."

"What wouldn't mother give for a real rose!" experimented Maisie artfully.

"Why, Maisie, take it!" said Georgette, ripping the blossom from its place.

Maisie laughed a little and cried more, pinning the rose back on Georgette's shoulder. "I *will*, thank you," she sobbed.

"Into the trunks, Maisie, with the shears," said Georgette, going. "Wire Bernstein you're theirs. Good luck."

As she neared the block where Duff's theatre was, she noted that the bills of "Zarna!" grew bigger than ever.

"Duff's on the road to glory," she mused, smiling

But when she actually bumped into him, a step or so further on, he had none of the signs he was

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due to wear, considering a house sold out for that night. His hat was shoved back from a face that was white with real trouble. But he called up a smile for Georgette.

"Why, it's you, Banana Fritters," he welcomed, shaking both her hands. "So glad you didn't die. You were Last Rose of Summer when you went away, and here you are in bud again. Hurrah for you, Sunrise on Mont Blanc, hurrah for you!"

"But for you?" queried Georgette.

"Oh! Me!" he cried, falling back into his pallid dejection. "My luck's up. It's got the Consumptive's Last Cough."

"Not with these things around," comforted Georgette, pointing to a "Ketrodoff."

"That's just it," fairly groaned Duff. "Been up to see her, and what do you think, Annie and Willie's Prayer, what do you think? She has pneumonia. Real thing. Two doctors and nurses. And me in a hole big enough to lose Billy Taft in. Oop-ta-ra, oop-ta-ra, tee-ree-ree!"

He sung with a touching requiem melancholy. His brief day was evidently moribund.

"Duff!" hissed Georgette. "Put me on for Zarna to-night!"

He threw out his hand as if begging consideration from her.

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"Go gently, Hashish, go gently. Don't kid on the last round. I'm knocked out. Dead in earnest."

"No more in earnest than I, Duff." She slipped her arm through his and walked him rapidly towards his theatre, the while telling him of her mastery of the part and her belief in her power to play it. "All I ask is a rehearsal. Call up as many of the cast as you can, and put one through—now—this very second!" she finished breathlessly.

"But the part takes brains," he insisted ruthlessly. "The play is a man's play. Ketrodoff was drilled by the author."

"Oh, fluff for man's brains and woman's brains, Duff! Where is the difference?"

"In the box-office receipts, Sweetness. Take yourself, Peaches and Cream, unless some man starts you, you haven't the mentality of a ten-year-old child."

"That may be true, Duff," she agreed, though snapping her fingers under his removing nose as if to waken him from a trance. "But explain this: Why does any man give himself the trouble to 'start' me unless the ten-year-old mentality appeals companionably to the age of his own? Nor am I unique in having to be started. Everything needs a start—the race, religions, motions, motors, men, and *mules*! Call that rehearsal."

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"Why, shine on, shine on," he said admiringly. "You've got the talk down pat, anyhow. Come on and rehearse then. Though little good 'twill do."

Entering the theatre with her by way of the foyer and there telephoning hurry-up calls to his performers, he was in a more anticipative mind by the time he stood at last upon the half-lit stage, making his usual stern preparations for the fray.

Demetrius Duff got ready for a rehearsal as for a swim for life, removing first his watch, then his scarf-pin, then his tie, then his collar, then his coat, and lastly his vest, but keeping his majestic hat, which stiff and proper article, pushed back to the last possible hair, remained miraculously in place through all the thick and thin of managerial skirmish. And though Duff while on the street or in society was suavely of indeterminate nationality, Duff on the stage conducting a rehearsal was so Irish that had the boards been turf and the side-scenes shamrock, they yet would not have "set" him in emerald enough.

Moreover, when he raved at his performers so hotly that their very eyebrows burned, they subtly cheered, knowing they were doing well enough to be adjudged worthy of help; conversely, when Duff said to his actor, "That'll do fine. Play it

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anny way you think best," that luckless creature's substitute was already settled.

Consequently Georgette's hopes rose when, after her first scene, with quite a handful of the cast to help her out, Duff's teeth began to grit and his weary sarcasms to fly.

"My, my! And will you hear that? Sobs from the Cell. I'm wondering now, Mr. So-and-so, indeed it's wondering I am if you have a glimmer of an idea of what your lines really mean." But the last word was "mane," as near as a toucher. "Yes, a glimmer. That's what I said. And meant. How's that? You have? I'm glad. That's good. Then do. See you do. Show me. Your cue now."

Then Georgette rocketed through another scene, nervously reaching a great height of goodness. Duff became rabid. Furiously grabbing a piece of chalk, he marked out spots for furniture, all the time keeping up a running fire.

"Look! All! This board's a couch. Remember! I won't say the same thing twice. This board's a couch. Get up! No one to sit on it but Zarna. But know where it is. It's here. This board. Kape it in mind with the one telling. And kape clear of it. Don't let me see annybody forget and putt his feet where the cushions might be at.

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Let me say it once and be done with it—this board's a couch."

But until she should get a lashing herself, very sure was Georgette that she was failing at some point. So she experimentally let out her voice, which she had been saving. And Duff ripped forth at her.

"I ask you, Soft Wings of Dawn, I ask you, is that the way to laugh? My, my, you Ambulance Gong, that would wring moans from an iced and opened oyster. Do you always laugh like Cries of the Wounded? Try again. Think of Mother-in-Law's grave and laugh hearty. Got there. Glory be."

And from that moment things raced to a ghastly but meritorious conclusion. At the pathos of the play's ending, Duff forbore sarcasms and became his natural self.

"When did you learn to weep, Violets on Toast?" he asked Georgette, drawing his hand across his wet eyes.

"This morning," she answered. "Was it only so short a time ago?" she wondered.

"And from whom?" was his suspicious query.

"A baby, of course."

"Hah, hah!" he snorted appreciatively. "Likely. They're that bad on the cars. But here's your last line. Bite through it."

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And through it she "bit" indeed, though his permission had nothing to do with the intensity of power she threw into her work. The psychic truth was that by some magic of coincidence she and Zarna were one and the same.

"It's sink or float with us both, Deliciousness, sink or float with us both," confided Duff, when, the rehearsal over, he and she were rushingly attending to the million and one last details. Messengers, wires, telephones were being worked by the dozen; and costumes were being fitted and altered. Scenes were being set. The hammering and confusion almost passed belief. "But are you wise in having no announcement made?"

"Absolutely."

"True, Joy of New York, half the audience will know you the minute you step on."

"Ah, I've been gone three months," airily purred Georgette.

"And the good it's done you! There's no denying you were always clever, but nails, Georgette Verlaine, nails! What's *learned* you to feel?"

"Fell in love with a married man, Demmy, and the wonderful newness of the experience must have unfettered my soul."

"Hah!" Duff snorted again, appreciating her *diablerie* of suggestion. "Then if two will help

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you, fall in love with me, Congestion on Fifth Avenue, get a move on and fall in love with me, for after your steppin' in at the eleventh hour to save, me heart's at your feet." For the first time he took his hat off, making more deferent his grateful shaking of her hands. "Now be off with you for a bite or sup, for it's all of six o'clock and you must be back here by seven."

"And I'm starving," remembered Georgette. Then she remembered something else and laughed softly. "Duff, I was to have dined with Yes Smith."

"You're one ahead of the whole city, then, for he's the chased, not the chaser. The town's mad in love with him. He must have thrown over clubs and whatnots without number if he has a date with you this soon."

"Not 'has,'" contradicted Georgette lightly. "Had. It was for three hours ago. I forgot all about it."

Duff put on his hat and whistled long and ominously.

"*He* won't," he promised.

CHAPTER XI

IN the whole orderly mechanics of existence there is nothing harder for the artisan to get a practical working knowledge of than the system of cogs and wheels which regulate the measure of success and mark the line of popular favouritism. A man or a woman may obey its laws from the cradle to the grave and die a failure—laughed at, indeed, for the pains that were taken. The machinery crushes its thousands for everyone it lifts to fortune, and seems to keep its best guerdons for those who abuse it, who are yawningly unconcerned about greasing its hinges when they creak, who have a lively disrespect for its power and noise, who refuse absolutely to study its needs.

Not but what Georgette had indulged in day-dreams about it, painting visions of the hour when stiff-necked managers would be the beseechers instead of the besought, when audiences would be grateful recipients instead of fickle patrons, when the ignominious pay-envelope would be done away with and emoluments would be figured as "profits" rather than "salary," when her name would be

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spelled in electricity across the entire front of the theatre ; but these dreams had been freely acknowledged even by herself to be in the nature of " pipes," the fantasies of hope's opium, rather than any actual goal to be reached by emptying the fullness of her horn, bestowing as a free gift the reward of labour for which labour might go begging, and does.

The success of " Zarna's " first night was without precedent, bewildering the very ones who had hoped for it. According to every known human rule, the vast audience which had paid away its big money for the one and only purpose of seeing a much-advertised foreign actress, should, when forced to accept a home product already familiar to it, have been in a house-smashing humour. And perhaps there *was* a moment or two when the fate of audacity hung in the balance, but the moment safely passed. The substitute was plainly better than the original, for the unassailable reason that perfection knows no superlative. Just as " Zarna " had captured Georgette, so Georgette in turn captured her audience, and it showed its allegiance by thunder after thunder of applause—good, solid, roof-lifting American applause, punctuated occasionally by the excitement of the transatlantic tribute, " Bravo, Verlaine ! "

The papers next morning gave columns of

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analysis and praise; and pictures of Georgette from childhood to now, all miraculously embalmed somewhere and kept for this problematic moment, appeared on every page.

Nor was the phenomenon to be as brief as it was rare, for the success settled down for the season, giving sure promise of lasting for the thousand and one nights of the Arabian entertainment. The Ketrodoff went back to the shore which had lent her, and Verlaine hats, coats, shoes, scarfs, gloves, carnations, bon-bons, chewing gums, and ice-cream sodas made the fortunes of those who sold them.

Duff gave himself over to one rapturous day which was all ould Ireland from start to finish, especially finish, then went back to careful living, piling up the shekels against next failure; for just as in the orchards of Nature where a good apple season is followed by a no-apple season, so is it in the vineyards of Broadway.

Success, which so often wrecks a disposition which has hitherto passed for fine, and causes an arriver to forget the help of those by whom arrival was made possible, seemed to add just the one touch of softness and sincerity needed to improve Georgette. She enjoyed the whole thing immensely, but as an accident, not as a tribute; consequently her manner was as unprideful as ever, and she

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refrained from getting nerves, or tempers, or headaches, or haughtiness, or any of the other conventional impediments of genius. From Duff to the scene-shifter she had the same kind word that she had always had, and gave it, too, not with careful condescension which would have maddened them, but with a careless chumminess which intoxicated them.

Learned men who would have frowned her out of sight in the years of her obscurity were now quite ready to laugh at her pert witticisms, and many a wealthy lady opened to her a house which plumed itself upon exclusiveness; and, unspoiled by the flattery of these things, Georgette went to high places at late times, and ate moderately and drank temperately and talked immoderately and laughed intemperately, till she was always the exact centre of any whirl in which she participated.

The only noticeable change in her was that she dressed better than ever and grew undeniably prettier. True, she slept less—at the proper time, that is; but this defect she remedied often by day.

And one afternoon while Cora tucked a silk cover over her as she lay on her couch in the parlour, and said, evidently to an interloper, "She wakes very soon, sir, she had better be allowed to sleep—at your polite kindness," Georgette refused to come

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back from the borderland of dreams where she already was, and drifted right over into unconsciousness, letting the strange "sir" wait.

Then into that long unconsciousness came eventually the strains of music, bringing consciousness. Someone was playing her piano, exquisitely, but in cold, clean harmonies which seemed to accuse rather than to allure. Perhaps the air was to blame, for it was "*Ein Feste Burg*," that ponderously grand choral beloved of the stern Luther.

"Must be John Congdon," realised Georgette, springing up in welcome to him. "I knew it!" she cried gaily. "How are you? and why haven't you been before? Speak up! Don't play on as if I wasn't here!"

But play on he did, evidently talking through the instrument, his soul absorbed in the full chords, sharing the sternness of them. When the last one trembled coldly to extinction, leaving the room vibrant with premonition and warning, he said, his hands still on the keys:

"I have had a letter from Horace."

She came closer to the piano and faced the trouble, whatever it might chance to be, her slim prettiness resting effectively against the rosewood. Her jewelled fingers played with the fringe of the cover.

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"Well?" she probed.

"If it only were!" cried Congdon fiercely. "In the letter—he says——" Then he played on, to steady himself.

His tragic dumbness made her laugh.

Congdon's palms crashed among the keys, as he spurned them from him and jumped up.

"Oh, don't laugh!" he begged. "Horace says that he is separating from Rachel. Great God! Separating from Rachel."

Georgette plaited the fringe. The action was not diffident. It was meant to show John Congdon that the topic was his.

He brought it home to her. He pointed through the window in the vague direction of "down town" depths.

"Georgette," he said distinctly, "*there* live the women who are called 'bad.' But I do not believe one of them has pulled down a home, or robbed little children—as you have done."

She dropped the fringe and caught his hand furiously.

"Don't dare say such things!"

"Why not?"

She flung his hand from her in part answer.

"Consider me a little, too!"

"You!" he laughed shortly, "Consider *you*—

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I might have known. I know you so well. And you've proved my knowledge. It was Horace I did not know. I was a fool."

"You spoke too surely of him," flared Georgette. "You could have served him better by telling me that he was impressionable, affectionate, easily led, by asking me to be careful. And I would have been. I have never yet played with a man's weakness. But with his strength—that is another thing. It always tempts me to try to break it, to show him that it is pretence, and that I know it."

He had listened for a moment to hear if she had any real thing to say, and on finding she had not, he walked agitatedly back and forth, exclaiming :

" ' Separating from Rachel '—why, the cruelty of it, and the impossibility ! He can leave her, but he can no more ' separate ' himself from Rachel than from his own birth and boyhood by growing beyond them. Rachel, who went to school with him, who went chestnutting with him, who rode to cider-mill with him, who drove to church with him, who grew up by his side from dear child to dear woman—Rachel ! Separating from Rachel ! And for *you* ! "

As she reared her head in swift pride and defiance, Georgette, at that moment of accusation, looked anything but unworthy of a man's regard.

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"Doctor," she said oddly.

His profession rather than himself gave heed.

"What is it?"

"You make 'Nature' an excuse for many things of puzzling strength. Nature, staunch Nature, makes Rachel a true wife, a born mother. The same Nature, capricious now, makes Horace waver. Therefore are both of them to be treated with charity—she to be protected, he to be pitied? For me, though, nothing but blame? Is there no Nature here," and she pressed her locked hands against her heart, "which may cry out for its own, yes, and reach for it, but keep honest?"

"Then you love him?" broke from him in amazement. "No, not Horace. You couldn't."

"Couldn't?"

"*You* couldn't."

At her quick laugh, which, though mocking, was incomparably sweet, he clutched his hands spasmodically, saying:

"Oh, I know well how a man could go mad for you! You ride the wave, Georgette, you ride the wave! But I must not think of anyone but Rache, Rache, my tall, straight mother-girl. Do you know how young she is? Twenty-four. And facing this! You remember the barn doors at Crooning Water?"

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"The *barn doors*?" with a lift of the brows.
"Oh, yes."

"Great sliding things, a ton weight. I can see her—Rache—out there at night, one brave hand holding a child to the home of her breast, the other struggling with the massive timbers, shutting the cold from the horses, and no man to help her. A child herself, and deserted. I can hear the neighbours, 'And how is your husband? when do you expect him back?' Do you know what Rache will do? Instead of cursing him for a hound, she'll ask herself where *she* has failed. Yet, neither can I curse him. He would never have followed had not you led."

"Yea, Adam," said Georgette softly, though her eyes blazed. "'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.'"

"Georgette, listen! Let me tell you something you'll find hard to believe, you who have seen so little of man's restraint. And it is this: at every man's heart, good or bad though he may be, there is an inborn veneration for woman so deep that never, never would he say to her the word that should not be spoken, unless and until the *permission* within her had paved safe way for him. Flash your eyes and stamp your foot. It's the truth."

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"Man's truth. Perhaps there's a woman's truth top!"

"Perhaps there is, and I'd like to hear it. Poor Rache! Alone! What's the name of the oldest child?"

"You mean Pauline?"

"Pauline. I can hear her asking where her father is." His eyes flinched with pain. Like all men of strength so virile that it passes oftener than not for brutality, he broke down where a child's suffering was concerned. "Wouldn't it be easier for Rache, built the way she is, to answer, 'He is with God, my baby,' than to shut her white lips over words that dare not be said? Now, if Rache would only marry again——" He stared hopefully into space.

"Marry again? Ray?" exclaimed Georgette involuntarily.

His brief relief died. "Of course not. No. She couldn't. She wouldn't think it decent. Nor would it be—for Rache. She's too religious. Isn't there something about 'God's holy ordinance' in the marriage ceremony?"

"Ask someone who's participated in it," said Georgette curtly.

He hardly heard her, so keenly was he realising the scene at Crooning Water. He even called

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Georgette into confidence, forgetting her so truly as to forget her very complicity.

"And, Georgette!" He stopped his restless pacing and took up his position with his back to the tall mirror, the squaring of his shoulders showing militantly in it. He was preparing to bear up under the hardest thought of all.

"Yes, John Congdon, of the magically unleashed tongue?"

"Do you know what will happen some winter night? Croup. And Rache *alone*. Homer, that fat-throated little baby, choking to death, while his father dawdles around somewhere, and smokes a cigar and theorises on destiny. Can't you see her? Fighting the thing off till it gets beyond a fight? Not daring to leave? *Alone!* Then her frantic dash down to the barn—rat-infested, snake-ridden place—to saddle a fierce beast, and to ride him wildly through the blackness to God knows where in search of a doctor who will come too late."

"Stop!" stormed Georgette hysterically. (Homer, whose first word had been her own name!) "Stop! You croaking old woman! Hunting for trouble!"

"Don't think these things are not in line to happen. They are. Horace tells me he will be here in a few days, the 'separation' begun."

"Here!"

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"Here. In a city. What is Horace to do in a city? How live? He will give the farm to Rache, so he says. Good of him, isn't it? He might better have laid her in six feet of it! And he'll be here."

"Here!"

That was all she could say. She stepped in front of him and took hold of his watch-chain, twisting it as she had twisted the fringe.

He carefully rescued it. "Here. Pleasant for Horace, isn't it? All he can do is plough and plant and read and pray; and he can do one as well as another in this hot hell of hurry. What is the end for the poor boy?"

"'Boy'?" she smiled sarcastically. "I wouldn't worry about his being a boy!"

"I know you wouldn't. But I would. And it seems to me that even granting you never thought of Rache, never thought of Horace, in this matter, sheer selfish thought for yourself would have frightened you away from the risk."

"What risk?"

"Certainty, rather, of failure."

"Oh, speak more plainly! You've had practice enough, this last half-hour!"

On the point of answering, his mind suddenly went off on a new tack, and he was purposely

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dumb while he thoroughly explored the place it took him to.

She was well acquainted with this taciturn trick of his, and knew that it would be impossible to shake him back to speech until he should be ready. Impatiently patient, a hint of a smile on her lips, she backed to the piano stool, sat down, and, facing him, stretched out her two hands as far as they would go and rested them behind her on the keys. The drapery of her open sleeves flowed down on each side like extended wings. She looked like the Sprite of Music smiling at stern inspiration.

Though his eyes kept themselves fastened upon her, it was quite evident that it was some time before he really saw her. When at last he did, he drew a long breath of resolve and asked :

“Georgette, will you marry me ? ”

He folded his arms upon his broad chest and frowned at her, like a gladiator sizing up an opponent, not a lover making his protestation.

A note sung suddenly under her hand, evidence that his words had startled her. But the smile on her face grew subtly mocking and reckless.

“If I were only a doctor, now, with a quirk for music, music at the wrong time,” she said with honeyed softness, “I would turn around on this stool and majestically play ‘*Warum?*’ For you

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to answer, if you dared. I dare speak the ' *Why?* ' I always dare. It's, will I marry you to save Ray and Horace ? "

" Yes."

" Then, no ! "

" Take that back, if you can."

" You *love* me so, don't you ! "

He stared at her as impassively as before, showing that he was mentally retracing his steps of thought back to the junction-point where he had taken his matrimonial siding. His proposal was over and done with.

" All right. As you advised, Georgette, I *will* speak more plainly. Do you know what you will have to be to Horace to make up to him for all you've torn him from ? "

" That's *my* business ! " She walked up to him defiantly, and delivered the insult with courage, face to face.

" It *is* your business. That's just the point. You must not only be to him sweetheart and wife, as Rache was, but mother too, even as she is mother to him. And you must be his children. But there's even more. For what has a city to give him in exchange for his life inheritance in the hills ? Can *you* be for him the strength of the mountains, the courage of the broad dawns, the peace of the

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starlit nights? Georgette, Georgette, look at yourself!" He stood suddenly aside from the glass, leaving her confronted with her full-length reflection. She straightened radiantly. "Pretty oh, pretty enough!" he conceded sternly, "with soft lips, and curved chin, and shining hair, and eyes that dazzle; the face of you as fair as an opal set round with pearls, your dress the satin case that jewels come in, and you as valueless as they! Oh, jewels cost! They cost! I know that well—as much as a man chooses to pay away for them. But they are valueless. And for that boy who gives up his all for *you*, what can you give him in return but—a kiss!"

Like the young Grecian soldier who caught up the broken sword thrown down as worthless, and won his battle with it, so Georgette seized Congdon's very taunt to silence him with.

Her brilliant eyes vanquished his in the glass.

"Another one!" she answered.

CHAPTER XII

" YOU'LL never ask me to dinner again, will you ? " said Georgette to Yes Smith, point-blank, meeting him on the street one day.

" No," he replied, making a subtly careful appraisal of the cleverness of dress by which she managed to outshine every other woman alive and yet, as Duff put it, " keep on the pleasantest of terms with the police force."

If Yes Smith had any weakness at all, it was his desire to be seen with the best-dressed woman of the season.

" Well," smiled she cheerfully, " that leaves breakfast, lunch, and supper. I never cared much for dinner, anyhow."

" Not for mine." He weighed this out carefully. His words were always noticeably heavy with suggestion, falling on the ear with thumps of warning. " What explanation ? " he asked, frowning over the remembrance of her abuse.

Just here an Armenian candy-seller worked past, his tray of dainties slung to his neck, and his *opéra-bouffe* voice chanting, " Buy *Zarna* kisses ! " which

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articles were in evidence on the tray, and were chrome-yellow in colour, viscidly sticky, and twisted into papers, like dangerous torpedoes.

"There goes the explanation," she said with burlesque pride. "I'm the confectionery of the hour. Honest, Smith, you can't really afford to keep angry."

"I myself think I can even up better by being friendly."

"Is that a nice thing said hatefully, or a hateful thing said nicely?"

"Time will prove."

"'And may God have mercy on your soul,'" quoted Georgette amiably from the death sentence. "Sounded just like that. Kwee!" In one of her instantaneous freaks of mimicry she went through a choking scene, as of some malefactor dying by the rope, her face distorted, her eyes popping. "My last prayer from the gallows: *Supper, Smith!*"

And in that undecided fashion active hostilities were dropped. Georgette had been quite right in her estimation of his feelings—he could not really afford to be on bad terms with a reigning celebrity. Consequently supper eventuated. And others followed.

"Cling to his coat-tails, cold Soul of the Mist,"

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implored Duff. "He's a big boost to the business. Nothing brings money like money."

"Nor takes it quicker away. Use your sense, Demetrius Duff. Can you sing?"

Used to her switchboard mind, he answered composedly :

"I can carry a bit of a tune."

"Then tote it around to-night to what Cora calls '*chez nous*,' when it ought to be '*chez moi*.' I'm giving a musical."

"Pleased, Help Wanted, pleased. To-night? That's to-morrow, of course. The hour?"

"Oh, about two o'clock."

"And where is it you're to be, Lost and Found, between the fall of the curtain and two o'clock?" broke from him curiously.

"It's none of your, ahem! *darned* affair, is it, Duff?" sternly.

"None, true you are," with contrition.

"Then I'll tell you. At Winston's with some of the boys."

That evening after the performance, while Georgette was still in her dressing-room putting the final touches to her private costume, a particularly dazzling one owing to the supper and the musical, Cora, who had been summoned outside shortly before, came back with a nonchalantly

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announced message. She knew how little heed would be paid to it.

"A man at the back door, Miss Verlaine, insists to have a sight at you."

"Insistence strengthens the character," said Georgette largely. She was trying Smith's new diamonds in different situations in her hair.

"Something of that nature I inform him," admitted Cora scrupulously. "It did but add, however, to the insist. He continues in waiting there."

"Do I know him? Who is it?"

"He refuse his name, saying only that you expect him."

"No identification," said Georgette at once. "I expect too many. Cora, put your artistic eye and inartistic tongue upon this star. Have I got it in a good place?" She ducked down her glittering head for inspection.

"Indeed marvellous," praised Cora, fastening the diamonds. Then she added a scrap of personality unusual to her. "Ma'm'selle could break hearts to-night."

"Ma'm'selle is going to swallow oysters instead," Georgette shunted her severely.

Cloaked and radiant, she swept out of the theatre by the front entrance, a thoughtful concession

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arranged by Duff, whereby she avoided the admiring but plain-spoken hangers-on at the back ; and was soon journeying luxuriously to the celebrated Winston's in Smith's caravan of an automobile.

The place is known by all the everybodies and all the nobodies of New York. Those who are soberly in between may know it not.

Unlike mere vulgar restaurants, it does not strive to bulk electrically on the street's eye.

Though it is in the very panting centre of the city's glowing, glinting, night-born Midway of Pleasaunce, and glad indeed to be there, yet it hypocritically retires monastically within its grounds, as if it deplored its mad surroundings and was withdrawn in the spirit, if not by location, from the insensate gaieties of midnight—Winston's, the resort *par excellence* for supper.

The exemplary fidelity with which the management guards the propriety of the place is in itself a confession that risks abound. Yet fidelity never goes unrewarded, and the best people in the world are found at Winston's—if they have the price, and the price is high. It has to be, in *any* place whose aim is flowers in ice time and ice in flower time. Old habitués of Winston's forget where they are, in the enjoyment of supper ; new-comers

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forget their supper, in enjoyment of being where they are. And when it is remembered that the unmarried go to Winston's in order to dismiss their regrets at lacking the distractions of family life, and that the married go there to dismiss their regrets at possessing the same thing, the scope of the hostelry is seen to be wide.

From the mere point of interior decoration and beauty, Winston's is more than a place of suppers. It is a gastronomic Monte Carlo, dazzling with lights, heavy with perfumes, soft with music, human with the burr of low voices, a-rustle with silks and satins of magnificent toilettes, where, to the inarticulate but none the less heard cry of "*Faites vos jeux!*" the fortune of fair woman's favour is lost or won upon the *rouge et noir* of wine and viands, until the inexorable "*Rien ne va plus!*" of fate ends the game for one set and starts it anew for another.

It used to be a splendid vantage-ground upon which to meet New Yorkers, but so many outsiders go there for that very purpose, that now one mostly goes to Winston's for the sake of seeing the see-ers. Wild and woolly young men from the Lochinvar tracts of tall timber who accumulate twenty whole dollars go there and spend the mighty half of it in refreshments for three, and feel that they have

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thereby carved an indelible record for lavishness in the concealed mind of the waiter—who, to a calm certainty, has already pocketed twice that sum in tips, with the evening yet new.

At her own table Georgette had Yes Smith—naturally, since he was paying for the entertainment—also Brice Gunning, the paragraphist, and Lewis Tate, the writer of columns. And anybody who thinks that modern journalism lacks style should have seen the glossy perfection of the evening raiment of the two, and ever after keep his peace. Dukes would have looked dingy beside them.

Winston's, rather empty at the time of their coming, was rapidly filling up with new arrivals, and upon these, as they pushed by, Brice Gunning kept a sharp look-out, not because he was expecting anyone, but because of being built upon the plan which misses nothing if it can be helped.

"Our group gets a heap of attention," noticed Georgette, giving a pleasantly preening glance at her attendants.

"As it should," said Brice, with a quick bow to herself. "Catalina."

This last heralded the advent of a dancer of large renown and small costume.

"Can't bother to turn my head," said Georgette lazily, her back being to the entrance arch. "More-

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over, *I'm* satisfied with our own selves. What a prominent quartette we are ! ”

“ And in an assembly where every second personage is noted,” said Tate.

“ Or notorious,” Smith made ponderous amendment. He was sitting as close to Georgette as the carved chairs permitted and was leaning attentively towards her, not so much to bestow regard as to attract it to himself from the glancing world.

“ And what really makes us interesting,” pursued Georgette, “ is not so much the things we do as the things we might and don't. We talk that way too.”

“ How so ? ” cut in Brice.

“ Why, the real brilliance of our conversation never shows, it's right out of sight. But it's there. For everybody waits breathlessly for Yes to say something not moral, and he never does ; for Brice to say something witty, and he never does ; for Lewis to say something stupid, and he never does ; and for me to say something worth remembering, but I never do.”

“ By Jove, you at times come near it ! ” said Lewis Tate.

“ And that's the first time *you* ever got through in one syllable,” she pointed out, he being famously long-worded.

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This at once started him, as the exponent of verbosity, to defend his penchant ; and Brice, as its foe, to attack it. Smith, whose whole education—and it was far from being a mean one—had been soaked in through the ears, was keen to listen, but Georgette grew frankly bored.

“ Not only is it a mistake to consider length of sentence cumbersome,” went on Tate, who had already used up a dictionary to get so far, whereas Brice Gunning, who was further, had only parted with ten or twelve words, “ but it is equally a mistake to consider brevity trenchant, for brevity is always elliptical, which tends towards obscurity. For instance, where I would say ‘ He passed us, rolling swiftly along in his automobile, and he smiled unpleasantly at us as he passed,’ Brice would probably say—what would you say, Brice ? ”

“ Grinned by in his car,” answered Brice unhesitatingly.

“ Exactly ; and by so doing would sacrifice——”

“ My brains are ‘ all,’ ” interrupted Georgette.

“ Who pow-wows for brains down there ? ” asked Brice, showing by his knowledge of terms that Georgette had been imparting esoteric information. Then, apropos of two late comers who sat down near by, “ Dr. John and a convalescent jag—from the look.”

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"Danny Shank doesn't, that's one thing sure," replied she.

"Give us Danny," they clamoured. Danny was her funniest imitation.

"Wal," she began dubiously. And by a power of mental suggestion which was wonderful, she seemed to grow into Danny before their eyes, shrinking into a peaked and grasshoppery condition. "Ever hear tell 'bout Gene Hardin? Didn't feed his hands none too well"; and with an occasional scrape to her chin, as if to find out how much longer a shave could be staved off, and an occasional rub of propitiation to a rheumatic knee, she gave the story of the huckleberries and milk, convulsing all with the crafty old-mannishness of her.

A roar of applauding laughter greeted her efforts.

"Now Henny Custard!" they cried.

"Doc's convalescent jag wants to relapse," said Brice Gunning, observing the close disturbance.

"Doc's won out. Jag's back in his seat."

"Henny Custard!" was called again.

"Whoa!" bellowed Georgette obediently, adding menacingly, "*Back!*" Again she subtly transformed herself and was now round-shouldered-fat, comfortable, companionable, lazy, and big of face, wind-blown of hair and eye. Not only did she copy personality but morality, and conveyed

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perfectly Henny's lax concern about the postal laws. "Howdy? Letters? Naw! Yer beau's got 'nother gal. Haw, haw, haw! Back, *you* Pet!" Slash! "*This?* Aw, nuthin much. Foolin' with a gun and shot m' toe off, clear into Pike County. Haw, haw, haw! Gid up!"

The very rattle of the buggy and lurch of the reluctant horse were indicated in the sway of her lithe body, and another howl of laughter went up.

"Now, Sport!" was the next clamour.

This was a silent mimicry made by the hands, and more intensely clever than the vocal ones. Clearing away her glasses and plate, Georgette locked her fingers together, releasing four to represent the dog's legs, and across the cleared space she copied faithfully a hound's dragging gait, varied by its furtive thought impulses.

"By Jove, that's a photograph!" cried Lewis Tate, leading an applause which the others riotously joined in. They were not yet sated.

"Now give us Horry Dornblazer!" they besought.

"Horry Dornblazer," commanded Yes Smith, leaning closer.

Here there was a violent movement made by the two new-comers, the one jumping up protestingly, the other restrainingly, and while this last one, John

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Congdon, was pattering greetings disarmingly to the group, "Good evening, Miss Verlaine. Hullo, Brice. Same to you, Tate," the first one, his eyes ablaze, was ripping out :

"You push the lady too hard, gentlemen, though she is complaisant, I admit. But you ask too much. To give a perfect imitation when the original is at hand is difficult, even for a thorough actress like Miss Verlaine. I am Horace Dornblazer."

Smith took a careful drink. The two journalists inclined their heads with a vagueness which repudiated the salute. Georgette said promptly :

"Why, how do you do ? "

Following her suavely safe lead, Congdon forced his protégé into a new chair and took one himself, that they might get out of the public eye and assume the air of being peaceful adventurists.

"Horace tried to catch you at the back door," said Congdon.

"I am not catchable there." Georgette smilingly said this to Horace. She honestly tried to feel a thrill of liking for him, but all she could compass was a friendly commiseration that he had allowed himself to be drawn into Winston's in a ready-made suit, a home-laundered shirt, a sewed bow, and shoes that *were* shoes. His face well showed why Brice had characterised it as belonging to a "con-

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valescent jag," for it was white and sunken, ravaged with tortured thought.

"I want to see you!" shot from Horace. To him she was the only person in the room. But the fairness of her in her evening gown seemed to transplant her out of his commonplace world, and separated her from him by an invisible aura of space, not to be crossed.

"And aren't you?" she smiled again. Her voice was one of social banter.

Congdon heard a note in it which caused him to glance at her hands. The fingers were clenched in the palm. He rose and fairly lifted Horace with him.

"Will Cora let us wait for you in your apartments?" he asked.

Georgette's heart rushed out to him in a look of gratitude for his bluffing casualness. She paled with the relief of the respite. But she kept on brightly smiling.

"Cora's *forte* is letting people wait," she said.

"We take that as permission," he answered, with a friendly inclination of good night to all. He drew Horace away.

"That a bill-collector you're standing off?" demanded Smith, boring a stare into the departing, home-made back.

"You've hit it exactly," acknowledged Georgette,

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a wild brightness taking possession of her, and causing her to throw out the truth itself to be truth's most effectual blind. "I was in love with that man once."

"Cut it!" cried Brice in real consternation.

"I have. I should think anybody could see that."

"Excepting the individual himself," narrated Tate.

"He needs a green background," went on Georgette, still white and still extravagantly gay. "Boys, you don't know how well he shows up against leaves. He was positively handsome."

"'A substitute doth shine as brightly as a king until a king be by,'" quoted Yes Smith, for himself, he being indeed "by."

"I glimpse your general meaning, Yes," said Georgette, grasping eagerly at a change of topic. "But when it comes to talking of kings, aren't you hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds shy?"

"Not diamonds," he stolidly said, admiring his gift in her hair.

"That's so. Nor clubs, you hard-hitter!"

"Does the bill-collector *sing*?" asked Brice, whose literary mind had accompanied Horace to the scene of the *musicale*.

"Oh!" cried Georgette, going paler as she tardily

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remembered. Then her face brightened. Crowds would be her salvation. "I suppose my rooms are filled by now and I ought to be going." She made pretence of attending to her forgotten plate. "I can't leave this lobster."

"Not for that one," agreed Brice, Horace still on his mind.

When Georgette and her party finally reached her rooms, they found the *musicale* in full life; it had commenced without her, knowing that it possessed her Bohemian permission. The bright medley of men and women hailed her less as hostess than as another comrade. Nobody takes precedent over another in Bohemia.

Arrah Harrington, a dream of apricot velvet and silver, had just finished singing in Italian, and singing well, "*Io Vivo e t'Amo*," and for an encore was now singing better, "Let us jog on, My to-boggan, With no dog-gone Soul to care," and everybody was helping happily with the chorus.

Georgette at once sought out Horace, she always preferring the thick of a fight to the fear of it, though she knew that her real meeting with him could not be now, that the most she could do would be to get him to go away.

He rose and grasped her hands as a drowning man a rope, and it was clear that only the most

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elemental sense of convention prevented him from taking her in his arms.

"Send these people home," he ordered.

The crude note of assurance in his voice, his disregard of fitting appearance, awoke her easily aroused devil.

"They have only just come," she informed him sweetly. "And if I tried to 'send' them home, they'd guess something was up and they wouldn't go, but would stay to see the fun."

"To see the——" He dropped her hands and bent his head listeningly, as if she were speaking in a foreign tongue of which he knew only a few words.

"The fun," she repeated clearly.

Passion that was madness leaped across his face.

"Be careful," she said protectingly. "Don't set these people laughing at you."

Then, stilling the joyous hum in the room, came a few splendid chords from the piano, chords which knew their business and knew that their master was playing them. It was Duff beginning to sing "Drink to Me only with Thine Eyes," which ranks as a simple English ballad, but which is anything but simple, and, like many another English ballad, takes an Irishman to get the most out of it.

"Why, the monkey!" cried Georgette in as-

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tonished admiration, as his unexpectedly beautiful tenor flung broadcast the words :

“Drink to me only with thine eyes
And I will pledge with mine,
Or leave a kiss within the cup
And I'll not ask for wine.”

Being in tune for it as he was, the hymn-like simplicity of the air, laden with pathos to the breaking-point, acted upon the emotional Horace with the extravagance of “Home, Sweet Home” upon an exile who hears it abroad.

A gasping sob strangled in his throat, and he threw himself back into his chair.

Duff, through, and fighting his encore, came to the side of his hostess.

“Sure that's the fine old tune,” he said, trying to shift the praise from his voice to the composer. St. Patrick must have smiled in heaven at hearing the last word's nearness to “chune.”

“Demmy, you're a darling!” cried Georgette with conviction, putting her two accolading palms upon his shoulders.

Horace's tightened as he saw.

“Ah, when it comes to darrlin's,” said Duff richly ; and with the thoroughness of an expert he fully and completely kissed her.

As if Duff had been a lurching drunkard, Horace started guardingly to his feet, which seemed slowly

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to paralyse under him as he noted her unconscious acceptance of the caress. Her two hands travelled affectionately down Duff's arms till they nestled persuasively in his own.

"Come along," she said coaxingly. "You've got to sing again." She pulled him gently piano-ward through an applauding throng which widened to let them pass and closed again around them. Horace swayed uncertainly, like one whose mind is too dazed to carry commands to the muscles.

"Oft in the stilly night,"

sang Duff with magnificent tenderness. The words crept ringingly, clingingly, around the silent room.

"Ere slumber's chains have bound me,
Fond mem'ry brings the light
Of other days around me."

Horace crashed into the small vestibule, where Cora kept sleepy vigil over the grand wraps entrusted to her.

"You tell Miss Verlaine I am coming to-morrow at noon," he commanded harshly, "and that I must and will see her alone."

What the startled Cora flung after his disappearing form, being said in French, lost some of its terrific sound. The English of it was :

·"Sacred Name, what a devil of a brusqueness !"

CHAPTER XIII

"You are ill, Georgette," was the first thing Horace said to her when he came at noon, as he had promised, though in all likelihood the words were far from being the ones he had imagined himself saying by way of preliminary.

But her frail appearance disarmed him, she was so slight and pale, so harmless-looking in her limp white morning gown.

"That doesn't happen to be of importance just now," she said.

"No, for at last we are alone together!" he exclaimed, approaching her eagerly, his hands outstretched.

She slipped away from him, and put herself on the other side of the table, keeping it between them.

"Surely you have guessed what has happened? That I no longer feel the same?" she asked, not evading the issue a moment.

"Last night some madness possessed you or me," he parried, "because we were kept apart. It will have to be in my arms that you will tell me again, if you can, that you no longer feel——"

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She put her hand warningly on the bell-push.

"If I ring this, Cora will show in some of the boys and girls—they are playing cards in another room. I made them come. It didn't have a comfortable sound to me—your being here and no one else. Keep where you are till we have talked this thing out."

"It was talked out in Crooning Water. What happened there, and what has happened since——" he paused, made absolutely dumb for the moment by this one scant reference to the tragedy of his broken home—"leaves nothing to be 'talked' out. We must *live* it out now."

"Then, if the term suits you better, we'll call it living it out."

He struck the table with his hand.

"Be serious, if never in your life before!"

"I'm serious enough," she said quickly, "too serious to explode and bang." His clenched hand loosened under the hint. "Don't think, Horace, that I'm not as amazed as you are. I could hardly believe it last night when I saw that you had become less than nothing to me."

"Take care, Georgette," he warned. "Rather than be 'less than nothing' to you, I may choose to become, say, your murderer."

The melodrama of this antagonised her as nothing

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else could have done, and it emphasised, too, the strained uncouthness of his appearance.

"That sort of talk never curdles blood in broad daylight," she criticised cuttingly. "We turn lights down for that."

"Wait a moment, dear," he begged, as if beseeching a truce to her hardness. "Let me see if you know. You remember I told you I would come to you with my arms free." He again stretched them towards her, open, waiting. "And I *have* come—that way." The past few weeks haunted his eyes.

She could not bear the pain and bewilderment in them, and walked restlessly to the window, staring down town. John Congdon, in telling of the separation, said that the people who were "bad" were there.

"John Congdon told me," she acknowledged to Horace.

He so swiftly took her place before the bell-call that she laughed aloud.

"Couldn't I *yelp* 'Corā'?" she asked pointedly, using the most belittling verb she could think of. "How ridiculously limelighty you are with your 'murderer' and your general air of 'foiled again'! We actors are more refined. We cut drama out of private life. And now you reach toward your hip

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pocket. Revolver there? That's a music cue, then."

She sat down to the piano and daringly derided the worst by playing a few soft bars of Duff's song, "Oft in the Stilly Night."

Recalled to his senses by the very shock of it, Horace steadied himself and struggled to be quiet. He pulled a chair to the table and sat down, his lax palm open on the table-top, as if craving alms from kindness.

"Tell me what this is that has come to you," he begged. "Awhile ago you loved me. It seemed to be the same love that mine was. Mine is killing me. Yours is gone. What have I done? How lost it, Georgette?"

Her eyes brimmed full of tears. Herself a creature of storms, it took quietness to move her.

"Horace, I don't know," she said quickly. "I don't know. I don't know. That is all the explanation there is. I simply have left off loving. I don't think I can be a loving woman. I love people to love me, but never seem able to love in return. It may be the fault of the unreal life I have had. Let me tell you a little of it. You may see what I mean. First, I never have known a home. My mother was a dancer and my father was a singer. Because I was a very pretty baby

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they were proud of me, but I am sure they did not love me, for when I was ill or in trouble it angered them. I learned that it was wisdom to laugh and coquette with fate. My parents separated and my father kept me. He was the kinder of the two. I think this biased me towards men, making me look to them for goodness when I was lonely and wanted it. He married again. This other mother, of course, didn't care much for me. Then father died. I belonged to no one. I grew up just any way life let me. I went into department stores as a sales-girl. The women customers disliked me because I was flippant and pretty. But the men liked me, for the same reasons. A department store is worse than the stage for the terrible things that can happen, for the insults a girl gets. How I kept straight, I don't know. But I did. I can't say 'kept good,' for I knew too much. If I had been good, I'd have gone to the bad long, long ago. The ways were all open. And I found out in this second phase of existence that in order to get any care I had to be careless, to laugh and be bright. If I had a headache, nobody was anything but annoyed about it. So I choked my real self to death. I shouted with the crowd, whether they shouted my politics or not. Demmy Duff used to buy wardrobe stuff, and he took notice of me because

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I used to make him laugh. He finally got me on the stage—another place where my real self wasn't wanted. I was glad it was dead. It had never been any use to me. I worked hard and played harder, and at last broke down. At your place I grew back to strength. You were so well and strong that I got to thinking of you all the time. The *realness* of you seemed to reach out and touch me and to draw me out of the unreal world I had built up around me. Do you know why I had built it up? To guard against too much suffering; so that, when things fell to pieces, as they always do, I could say to myself, 'It wasn't real anyway. What if it *does* go?' But at Crooning Water there was no pretence."

"Not till you came."

"Not till I came. I began to pretend at once. Sometimes, when I was lying in the hammock, I used to pretend that I had had a home like Crooning Water when I was a little girl, and a mother who had brushed my hair, and tied my shoe-strings, and put my white apron on and sent me to school, and taught me to sew, and to say prayers at night. Real things began to count. The apple blossoms particularly. They were so pretty. Even the green onions that I used to think so vulgar and horrible began to look pretty to me after awhile, white and

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green like a Paris gown. And then—that night—on the trail—in the dark, when you caught me to you, and said, not gently but with your teeth gritting, ‘ You have always been my girl,’ the dead ghost of my real self came back for a moment and loved you, loved you terribly, as ghosts must always love, their time is so short. I now think that I loved not you yourself, but the substantial things you stood for—home, labour, fidelity. Now that you have sacrificed these things, even for my sake, there is nothing left for me to love. For love has died, like the lilac, Horace, in a night. And I am not to blame any more than the lilac bush is to blame.”

His face, softened by comprehension and tender with hope, was beautiful once more ; and he spoke with his old note of surety and triumph :

“ But the lilacs will come again, Georgette.”

“ Wait till I tell you the last thing.”

“ And that is——? ”

“ Not only is the love gone, but I am glad. I was ashamed of it. My unreal world is the best.”

“ But I can make the real one take its right place with you. Come with me, Georgette. Leave these people who sing love-songs, but have no love in their lives. Leave them. Take my hand, and *live* the song too sweet ever to be sung where others

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can hear. Come down with me into some quiet valley, of warm earth and true furrow, of planting and harvest. My arms can do more than idly to fold around you: they can coax a living for you from the friendly, willing soil. Try it, *my* girl. Give me the chance to work for you—to let you rest.”

“Rest?” The laughing devil crept back to her eyes—slanting, beautiful eyes they were, full of Nature’s flirting charm. The word was a sham and roused in her the spirit of reckless raillery that was sometimes her salvation, sometimes her undoing. Moreover, the swing of her emotion, which had just carried her over the line of reserve into sentiment, was carrying her now as inexorably back. “Rest? Don’t you suppose I’ve seen the ‘rest’ of a farmer’s wife? The ‘rest’ begins at sunrise, or before, doesn’t it? and keeps on till the dark forces a cessation. I believe he lets her sleep only to save kerosene oil. To churn, to bake, to milk, to cook, to wash, to iron, to scrub, to sweep, to dust, to polish, to tend the pigs, to feed the chickens, to drag water to the calf, to dig potatoes—these are some of the ‘rests’ of a farmer’s wife. For myself, I’ll keep on ‘working’ as an actress.”

“My wife shall be here,” striking his heart, “not on the stage.”

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"Which decides me against the honour," she said insolently. "Stop to think. I earn from four to eight hundred dollars a week. I spend it as it comes. Does a man on a small farm get that much cash in a year? In two? In three? And what proportion does his resting wife get? From the look of her clothes, a dime a month, if she's good. Look at my gown. Raggy and simple, isn't it? But I gave fifty-five dollars for it. If I'd waited for it till I'd saved up egg money, it would have come in handy for granddaughter's shroud. My present job being light and remunerative, you'll have to think up something very special to induce me to try 'resting'!"

Her change to hardness and coarseness had been so lightning-swift, so uncalled for, that the effect of it was to daze him, and he let it pass over his head as if it were the ravings of some new rôle she was rehearsing. Yet the weight of it dragged him down to insane weariness again.

"You were right about the revolver, Georgette," he confessed. "I bought it last night. I was going to kill myself."

Suicide talk, of which she heard a great deal in her life and of which she was properly sceptical, never stirred any chord of mercy in her. The self-slayer goes silently.

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"Why didn't you, then?" she demanded scornfully.

"I grew afraid of God." The straightness of this reply startled her into a slight realisation of what the night had been to him. "And I made myself face another day. But I am so tired, Georgette! So alone. Haven't you any pity? You asked me to think up something special as an inducement. Girl, my girl! Is love nothing to you then?"

"If it lived. But it is dead."

He rose and came to her, but she was so apart from him in spirit that she never guessed what his move might mean until she felt herself caught in his arms and held close to him.

"Mine," he said gently, "mine. And I will hold you until you know it, as you knew it there—in Crooning Water."

He brought the palm of her hand against his lips, and kissed it again and again. He laid his face to hers, and kissed her hair. And then he kissed her soft, panting mouth. The inert quietness of her, which at first had seemed to him to be consent, brought her release from his embrace. He slowly set her free, but said beseechingly:

"Surely you cannot feel now that love is dead?"

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She walked across the room, her hands covering her face, like a schoolgirl. When she turned and took her hands laggingly away, it showed white and sick as only loathing could make it.

"Feel?" she said furiously. Then her tongue rushed unhesitatingly upon the most horrible words she could think of. "I feel exactly as if one of Henny Custard's bandages soaked with horse-liniment had gone around me!"

The revolver glittered in his hand and was levelled at her.

Her brain received instantaneous impression of many things, distorted like a picture taken by flash-light: her body on the floor, a line of red staining the rug—the papers in the evening—head-lines—Actress Murdered by Frenzied Lover—more photographs—a funeral—flowers—a beautiful quartette sung by hungry singers who would go to Winston's afterward—a new dress she had never worn—perhaps, disgusting thought! his dead body piled on top of hers, for he would never be fool enough to go tamely to his hanging—the indecency of it all! The whole sordid lack of necessity to the inevitable thing aroused her to such anger that she had no time for fear. And she walked up to the gun, more than ready for it. Had she stepped backward instead, her life would have paid the

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forfeit, man's unconquerable impulse being to kill the prey that flies.

"I'll say something first," she raved contemptuously. "When I get through, pull your trigger!" She was not daring him. She was granting him full permission. "But kindly wait a second till I tell you something I never intended to, not being a person who claws out and shoves the blame on the other! And you needn't guard your revolver as if I was trying to get it, for I'm not. I don't want it. Nor am I trying to bluff you out of shooting. Shoot! I'd as soon be shot as live. The world is none too delightful a place with a man like you on top of it. You say I duped you. And broke a woman's heart. I did neither the one nor the other. It was you yourself. Quite true, I flirted with you. But that one fact should have warned you. I myself, who can stand a lot of oddities, would have had my doubts of a girl who could hold a woman's child in her arms and over that child's head make eyes at the woman's husband. You were wonderfully charmed with me because I was pretty, light-hearted, and willing to be made love to and to make love. Why be amazed now that I keep the same? I am still pretty, still light-hearted, still willing to be made love to, still ready to make love—but I've changed men. That's

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what staggers you. *I* haven't changed. I'm exactly the same. What particularly pleased you was my lack of restraint. I still own it. You used to be interested in spite of yourself because I mimicked friends. You became a friend. I added you to the mimicry. You knew all these things—that I was flippant, fast, a flirt, vain, changeful. Who, then, duped you? You. I told you to stay where you belonged. Who, then, broke a wife's heart? You. In your home you had a woman who was all faith, love, purity, truth, loyalty. You put these beautiful things to wicked, miserable death, so as to make room for a person like *me*. And now it's my turn to be put to death, because I'm still *me*." The words had raced like a raging flood, tumbling one on top of the other. She now checked them, as futile. "Ah, what's the use? Shoot! You've tired me out. Get at it and get through! Do you hear me? Shoot!"

"No," he said, with the dull banality that always marks a crisis. "I was insane. Forgive me, Georgette."

Suddenly weak and powerless, she dropped into his chair at the table, her intent regard steadily on him.

The gun worried him. He looked at it as if marvelling how it came into his hand. On the point

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of replacing it in his pocket, he plainly wavered the act in his mind, and finally laid the weapon upon the table, fitting it attentively to a certain spot as though he felt it could not be comfortable anywhere else.

Then he walked over to the window, pulled the curtain aside in order to see the city clearly, and stood looking out at it.

His movements suggested some lines to her, and she tried to recall them, but could not. The intentness of her regard upon him slackened. She shifted it to the revolver, of which she was by now deathly afraid. It looked as if it might go off of itself.

At last Horace came to her again.

"Forgive me," he said once more. "And try to think more kindly of me."

"I do already, I do, I do!" she stammered, a surge of repentance rushing over her.

He stopped her with a gesture, then took her soft chin in his palm, and turned her face up to his.

"My girl. Good-bye."

Whether he actually said the words, or whether his broken-hearted glance of farewell said them for him, or whether the mere sense of them spoke within her own consciousness, Georgette could never be quite sure. The silence in the room she remembered well and for very long.

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Finally aware that she was indeed alone—and the loaded revolver seemed to menace the loneliness—she thankfully remembered the card-players in the other room, so rose and hurriedly sought them.

But she found the card-table deserted by all except Yes Smith, who sat there critically examining his white fat hands and carefully tended nails. He could do it by the hour if his mind was overworked.

“Where is Arrah? Brice?” she demanded, surprised.

“Gone,” he replied, dropping the word heavily. It chanced to mean much.

“Well, you’re here, at any rate,” she remarked in tone of philosophical acceptance, the inference being none too flattering. She flung herself into one of the vacated chairs and shoved the cards towards him. “Play a game with me,” she begged. “To calm my nerves. I’m upset. And no wonder. For I’ve just had a devil of a scene with an idiot. Cut!”

He picked up the cards and sat running them through his hands, his glance falling upon them but infrequently, being busier appraising the excited crimson of her cheeks, the reckless blaze in her eyes. Her brilliant colour, the childish white dress, made her resemble Pierrette in a pantomime.

“Your language has improved too,” he growled

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weightily, the growl being a mere matter of larynx, not temper. "A little while back, and you would have said, 'A hell of a scene with a damn fool.'"

As the full oaths rolled around the room, her ears flinched from them, but she was without power to resent them consistently, for his statement was true.

Armoured by the knowledge, he showed no concern, but continued to run the cards ruminatingly through his hands.

Making no pretence ever to own anything but money and passions, his honesty of attitude gave him a certain dignity. Since one of his passions was to dress well and be seen at the right places, he was respected; since another of them was always to play to win, he was feared.

"What caused Brice to go? And Arrah?" she asked suspiciously.

"I caused them. Told them I'd stay."

"And kindly tell *me* what authority *you* have to dismiss my friends!"

"Evidently sufficient. For they dismissed."

The neat briefness of this impertinence sent Georgette's ever-ready smile dancing across her face, angered though it had been.

His cogitations suddenly ended. He slapped the cards squarely before her.

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"You cut," he ordered with weighty deliberateness. "A red card, you marry me; a black card, you refuse."

A soft peal of unaffected laughter broke from her.

"What happens to be so humorous?" he rumbled.

"Not you," she apologised. "I'm laughing at the variety of deaths I am being offered."

"Deaths?"

"That's what I said!" was her gay response. The gambling glint leaped into her eyes. She placed her hands upon the cards.

She cut the nine of diamonds.

"Scotland's curse," she commented. "And if Scotland doesn't know why any more than I do, Scotland is ignorant indeed."

He crushed his hand down upon hers, pinioning it and the card to the table.

"You abide by that cut?" he demanded.

"Take your hand off mine. I don't like the feel of it."

He failed to obey. "I've known you to stand more and object less."

"Yes, but I'm finding out those have not been the wisest moments in my career."

"Never mind that. Tell me you abide by the cut."

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For a second time within a brief period her mind turned into a gallery of moving pictures. She remembered some schoolgirls she had seen in a convent in France. They were floating rose leaves upon a little brook, to tell their married fortunes. Even from the convent a girl's fortune is spelled by the letters that spell a husband's name. The girls had been so sheltered, so happy, so innocent! Georgette felt again the same vague pain of wonder—not rebellion, only wonder. Why had she been thrown from the start upon the mercy of the fighting world? And again she met the pain, as she had met it then, with the only bravery she knew, the bravery of a smiling fatalism. For some the life-stream was flower-bearing, leading to homes, to firesides, to the heaven of children's voices. For herself it was this thing that the card stood for—a swollen, muddied torrent, carrying her to shores of wreck and death. Of what use had been her constant struggle to escape it? She belonged to it by inheritance.

“ ‘ River of my race, receive me ! ’ ” she quoted, smiling her enigmatic smile into the alert eyes which watched her. “ That's my cue to jump in, Yes.”

“ It's a go, then ? ”

“ It's a go. Take your hand away, and come victoriously down stage.”

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He removed his imprisoning hand, and leaned back, satisfied. Then, for reason of his own, he took the cards from her reach and held them.

"Neat refinement about your proposals, isn't there?" she asked retrospectively.

"It was the one way of making you consider it," he answered. "Nothing ever attracts you but dallying with a chance."

"Um," she purred idly. She was thinking of the twenty-six black cards she might have cut. Then she thought something else about them, and said it sarcastically:

"Tempestuous, when it comes to affection, aren't you?—taking twenty-six risks against it!"

Under the taunt his hand opened, and he slid the cards, face upwards, across the table, revealing the fact that all the red cards had been arranged in the centre, the black ones at top and bottom.

"The risks were practically none," he said. "You have two marked traits: you take what comes, so I knew you would not shuffle; and you are fair on the divide. I've noticed that you always cut square in the centre."

"Then it was a foul play, wasn't it, Yes?" she asked happily.

"It was not. The black cards were there."

"All right," she said, apparently just as happily.

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" Well, since you are the man of my untrammelled choice, I'll make you a few presents."

She went to a desk, unlocked a box upon it and began hunting among her jewel-cases. She chanced upon Pauline's withered bouquet which she had kept as a talisman. She held it up.

" This is what improved my language—for a while." She dropped it from sight.

For all he knew it might have been catnip, so he naturally made no remark. Coming back, she put into his hand the gifts that he had made her.

" What tomfoolery is this ? " he grumbled.

" It's Smith-foolery. The Tom-foolery I'm keeping. Take the things back. They were spoils. I robbed you. I didn't mind it then. But I couldn't bear the things around now, and I don't know why."

Nor did she ; but he knew.

" You want to lessen the feeling that you've sold yourself ? "

" How nice of you to think of it ! " she said faintly. " But you've expressed it exactly."

He slid the cases slowly into his pocket, thinking of something cognate. He finally uttered it.

" George, are you already planning to play fast and loose with me ? "

" I wasn't," she said sharply, " but that tone of voice reminds me that I *can* ! "

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"You can't."

The imprecation and threat of this for a moment startled her. Then she rallied laughingly.

"Why, how could you stop me? You couldn't do a thing but talk, and *that* won't hurt me!"

"You're partly right—I couldn't do a thing but talk; and you're partly wrong—it *will* hurt you."

"Why, you're an enemy," she faltered, aghast. "What makes you want to marry me?"

The exhaustion of the morning was telling upon her, and she sat wearily down. But she soon began to laugh softly at a vision conjured up by her own words.

"You only have to go outside, Yes, and toot your auto horn to fill your car full of Venuses! Why me?"

"Laugh," he said, clenching his heavy white hand and bringing it down upon the table with a quick blow. "I love you for it and I hate you for it. Better be afraid of angering me too far, though, for I am not a gentleman. I want to be, and I tried to be, but it's something money won't buy. Everything else can be bought. Even love. I happen to want you. You're cheerful." Again he struck the table, a smashing but muffled blow. "You're cheerful. Corner you, you're cheerful.

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Master you, you're cheerful. Hungry, you're cheerful. Fêd, you're cheerful. Whether it's too cold or too hot, you're cheerful. Rich, poor, sick, well, you're cheerful." A third time he crushed his fist down, the nine of diamonds fluttering up like a frightened leaf. "You're cheerful. And I want it."

"The Lord knows, you need it!" she commented, looking at him in spellbound, disgusted admiration. "Take a fool's advice, Yes, and go home. If you are to become the apple of my eye, you'd better keep right out of my sight. Go home!"

CHAPTER XIV

JUST as even an indefatigably mischievous child has its moment of pause which a stranger might take for goodness, but which its parents well know is but the hatching period for a fiercer outburst, so New York has its time when it stops and draws its breath for an augmentation of the fray ; though to the untrained outsider it may seem to be simmering along very peaceably. The time—not easily pinned down to a day—belongs to the late fall, when the scourge of Thanksgiving gaiety stands in the path making faces, and the blight of Christmas duty hides around a corner shrieking things.

Many a person stops to wonder whether a note falls due, or any other calamity of debit, to account for the vague pain of undigested trouble haunting the breast. The period is not only mentally unhealthy, but physically dangerous. Invalids who have bravely held out all summer give up and die suddenly—for death is always sudden and unexpected, though waited for from hour to hour, imminent from birth. And one's healthiest friends in a moment of depression go to a doctor and find

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out they have an incurable malady. Firms that have been promising to pay send a bankruptcy notice instead. Almost anything is likely to happen, especially if unlikely.

The chill which nips the air is more premonitory than climatic, for a person shivers in a temperature which later would be estimated as warm. Those who own new and elegant furs put them on, saying furs are comfortable in such weather ; and those who lack them say furs are ridiculous in such weather. New York wives go to Florida, and Florida wives come to New York—which keeps the peace.

Georgette had furs, and lovely ones. Therefore she had them on. In summer garb she was pretty, but in silver fox she was beautiful.

" And since John Congdon hasn't been near me for weeks, he probably thinks he's cast me off for ever, so I'd better go see him and get him out of the notion," was the conclusion she announced to herself one idle Sunday.

His severely ugly motor-car was in front of his door, heralding the fact that he was within.

" It's John Congdon all over," she said, looking at it with compassion. " Plain and uncomfortable. No idea of pleasure in any line of it. But "—generously—"it covers the ground."

She found him in his office. And it was empty, except for himself.

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"Business slack?" she asked, looking around.
"Or have you killed them all off?"

She dropped radiantly into the consulting chair. He pushed back his own, and contemplated her professionally. Disquiet clouded his glance.

"Miss Verlaine, I hope you are not ill again."

"'Miss Verlaine'! That shows you are angry. What have I done now?"

"Nothing new, I hope. Do you know what has become of Horace?"

"No," she replied, becoming defensive and cold.
"Nor did I come here to talk about him."

"But to have me talk of him. That's why I'm doing it. I sent him back to Crooning Water."

"Oh, he couldn't do that!" she cried involuntarily.

"He's a better man than you think him."

"To go back—like a whipped dog?"

"A whipped dog may be a brave one. And a brave dog only needs one whipping. It's the cur that has to be kicked around all the time. I told Horace that the least thing he could do was to go back and find out if Rache could make any use of him."

"Use?"

"Yes. A woman needs a man on a farm. I pointed out to Horace that she would have to hire

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someone. So I asked him if it wouldn't be only decent of him to offer to work for her till she got suited. He finally caught the drift of the thing. A worse man than Horace would have thought too much of his own pride to have gone. But Horace looked at Rache's side, at last. So he went."

"Ray wouldn't take him back. She's too good!"

"I had the same fear too. But a really good woman knows how to let up on her goodness. A half-way one doesn't."

"Ray took him back?"

Congdon leaned to his desk, and hunted industriously in pigeon-holes till he found two letters. These he dusted with extreme and thoughtful pains, his eye dubiously on his visitor, to whom he eventually confided:

"He wrote and told me all about it. I asked him to. For I wanted to know. I didn't ask her. For the same reason. And she wrote too. I have hold of the complete story. Do you want to hear it?"

For once she let herself give a simple and subdued answer:

"Yes. If I have the right."

"Your scruples are six months late," he said practically and surgically.

He opened the two letters flat upon his desk and

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spread them comparingly side by side, in search of a good beginning point. Having found it, he covered both letters with a protecting hand and started in to talk. Like most people of habitually few words, he owned an astonishing stream of them. This was one of the times when he turned the stream on. Plainly he had so dwelt upon the scene pictured in the two letters that he seemed to see it in reality as he spoke.

"Horace got down there in the evening, after dark had fallen. Winter strikes Crooning Water long before we have it here. He speaks of the dead mulberry leaves rustling under his feet. Horace is unfortunately a bit of a poet, and non-essentials, if they are pretty enough, hit him hard. Rache told me nothing of fallen leaves nor of the lonely rustle of them in the dark."

Georgette moved shrinkingly. She knew why Horace had noticed the mulberry trees. Congdon paused to see if she had anything to say. But she was silent. So he continued :

"Anginette had just taken her little one and gone back to her own home for the night—Anginette Shank. She had stayed the day with Rache. They are two women somewhat alike, both pure and good. Oh, I know all about Anginette. Two pure, good women—one robbed of happiness by death,

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the other by life. Well, Anginette had gone. On the porch—and it was too cold for her there, and too dark and too lonely—was Rache, her head leaning against the dead honeysuckle vine. And Rache is no leaner, you know that. Nor is she a person who's often alone, mostly having a child by her side, or an animal at her feet, or someone around upon whom she is waiting."

A quick remembrance of Rachel—coming over the warm grass, a cup of milk in her shapely white hand—bringing it to the hammock—again Georgette stirred restlessly.

Congdon saw, and seemed to know why.

"Yes," he said, as if in answer to a speech. "It looked like a broken heart, did it not? Rache, in the dark and the wind, her soft brown head lying on the dead branches from which the leaves and sweet-smelling white flowers had fallen. At his step she jumped up. He spoke to her. He asked her not to be startled or frightened. And do you know what she asked him in return? Asked him why she should be startled or frightened at the coming of her husband."

Congdon stopped to think this over for himself, saying reflectively at last :

"Her 'husband.' Rachel is a woman who'd need a lot of divorcing, you see. Even if Horace

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had kept up the desertion and sent her the papers, I don't think they would have divorced her in the least. To explain her idiosyncrasy, she says in her letter that a man who is the father of a woman's children has to be that woman's husband, with or without papers. . . . Horace told her I had sent him back to say that the woman for whom he had betrayed her had in turn betrayed him."

Except that she locked her hands convulsively within her muff, Georgette made no sign of feeling the knife. As Congdon might have stopped in the middle of an operation to see if his patient was sufficiently chloroformed, so he now stopped and peered into the depths of the consulting-chair. He went on more gently.

"Horace said the rest of what I told him to say—asked her to use him, if she wanted to use him, lacking better help—use him like a harrow or a drag, even if she propped him up in the barn, nights, after getting through with him. Well, he gave her the chance. But she wouldn't take it."

"She couldn't," whispered Georgette, drawing a choking breath. "I knew it."

"No, she couldn't. You remember that porch by the old honeysuckle vine? It's up two low long steps from the ground. Horace was at the foot of these—the earth was all the home he had—

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talking up to her when he gave her the chance to punish him. That's the chance she couldn't, wouldn't take. For when she heard that he had been cast out like herself, she put out her hand—reached down to him—drew him up the two steps—till he stood on the level beside her—his wife. That's Rache."

Congdon consulted one of the letters, found a place in it, creased the rest from sight, deliberated a few minutes, then silently handed the passage to Georgette.

In Rachel's square, graceless handwriting, black and plain as print, she read :

"The children were upstairs asleep, doctor, and how could I have borne to look in their faces the next morning if I had sent their father away in the night from his own home ? The first fault had not been mine, and it was now coming to its own end. But the second fault would have been mine and nothing could ever have mended it. It's a strange thing, but I can't bring myself to hate Miss Verlaine as I would have hated her if she had made Horry happy, though this would have been good of her ; but as she was wicked enough to be unkind and bad to him, I am trying to forget. But I ought not to say wicked, for there is nothing wicked to her any more than there is to a nettle in a lane

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which stings people because God made it that way, and put it there. We can only wonder why, and keep away from it. The children love her and miss her and talk of her all the time. But I must learn to put it out of my mind. People may suppose it is easy for me to do the right thing, but it is not, it is very hard; but somehow I do not dare keep angry with Horry, any more than I dare keep angry with the children when they have been bad. For though I want them to be good, yet I want them to love me too, and I have found out that when I am at my wits' ends with them and don't know what to do, that the only thing is to be forgiving."

"She can't write the word, you see," said Congdon, taking back the letter and reading the last sentence. "She can't write 'forgiving' correctly. But she can do it."

Georgette was thinking of the other letter. Congdon had taken it up. He frowned slightly as he ran over the fine and flowing handwriting.

"Horace is a good speller," he said dryly.

Georgette hardly heard him. The room seemed to grow strangely and faintly hot. She dragged the fur collar from around her throat and restlessly twisted it. That other letter! But Congdon refused to hand it to her. Indeed, he determined not even

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to quote from it. He shoved both letters back into their pigeon-hole.

"After all," he said, "I shall not let you know of the words that passed between them. I wanted to touch your heart. But I firmly believe you have none to touch."

"And you are always so right," she concurred conclusively.

He angrily ripped Horace's letter again into view.

"Listen, then," he ordered harshly. He read aloud :

"Perhaps the only thing that is left for me to do is to work for her. Were you right, Congdon, in thinking a man can ever *go back*? For a short while I thought perhaps you were, because she took my hand, and drew me into the house, and we went together and kissed the sleeping babies, and Rache told me that for their sakes things were to be just the same between us. Then we went below again to where the lamp was lit, and we sat down, and tried to talk naturally. Tried! And at last we were silent. We have been silent before. But it was never like this. She felt it too. And she came to me and knelt beside me—Rache, on her knees to *me*!—and she hid her face in my hands, weeping, and said, 'Be good to me, be good to

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me, for I see that things can never be the same again.' "

Congdon stood up with rough haste, and ran his hand disarrangingly through his hair.

"And that's how we have to leave them," he said. "Housed together, facing the winter problem of how possibly to stand the pain of things that are the same and yet never the same again."

She stood up, too, asking poignantly :

"Isn't that your problem? And mine? Everybody's? Isn't it *life*?"

"Perhaps," he granted curtly. "And now, if we have anything more to say, let it be of something else. About yourself—for one thing, I am not satisfied with the look of you."

"An old complaint of yours."

"You are working hard, I know. And that is not dangerous. You are playing hard. And that is not dangerous. But be careful of making play of your work, and work of your play."

"Well, good-bye."

"That means that you do not wish to talk about yourself. All right. But remember this, when you do wish it, when you need help, I am here, as I have always been, ready."

"It is queer that you are good to me," she said restively, "yet hate me so."

"I do not hate you."

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She pondered his words "need help." She needed it indeed. But was there any to be given? If "a nettle in a lane," was she not then predestined of Fate to sting the hands of those who caressed her, ordained to be cut down and cast out? Did he know of any "help" for this?

"I half want to ask you something," she faltered.

"Wholly want it."

"I am afraid you may laugh at me."

"Have I ever laughed at you? Even when you have been amusing?"

There was no sarcasm in his voice, nothing but kindly truth. He had never laughed at her, whether in mockery, idleness, or levity. And that was the secret of her fondness for him. So many people had laughed!

She forgot her question. The steadfastness of him wrung the unpremeditated words from her:

"John Congdon, I wish you cared for me!"

"I do care for you."

Quietly folding his arms, he stared at her over them very unemotionally.

"You telegraph post! I mean *liked* me."

"I like you."

"Well, loved me, then!" Getting angrier, she got franker.

"I love you."

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"Oh!" with a furious stamp of the foot, "why do you densely force me to say it out? I meant, of course, I wish you had loved me—as a man—loves a woman."

"I love you as a man loves a woman."

He enunciated the words with calmness and precision. They filled the bottle-lined office like an important prescription about which no mistake must be made.

Her anger was swept away by timidity. Taking a halting step towards him, she stammered brokenly:

"Then why—then why——?"

"Why have I never let myself say it before?"

"Yes."

"Because I feared I was loving something that was not good."

"Oh!" Anguished beyond control, she gave the cry helplessly, as a brave man might moan out under unbearable pain.

Congdon quickly took her two hands and held them protectingly, championing her against his own insult. "I would have risked it for myself," he explained carefully, like a conscientious professor to a class, "but I had those dream-children to guard, Georgette—the ones you told me would be cheaper to *keep* in dreamland."

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"What a splendid memory you have, John, for things to forget!"

"I remember every word you ever said to me, Georgette."

"Choice collection."

"You said I would kiss you sooner or later."

"Did I?" wearily. "Evidently I fibbed."

"Georgette."

"Yes?"

"Shall it be now?"

"No," she said, quietly desperate.

"Why?"

Schooled from her neglected babyhood in the wisdom of smiling at hurt, she smiled now into Congdon's waiting, honest eyes.

"Well, on the playbills I'll keep Verlaine, but in the obituary column I'll be Smith."

"And that means——?"

"I've promised to marry Yes."

"Oh, not that!"

"Yes; Yes. Sort out his name. It's in there."

He dropped her hands as if they had been leprous, and stepped backward, to get into a separate, purer atmosphere.

But pity fought its way uppermost, and he said sadly:

"You poor girl! You poor little girl!"

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"Me?" She would keep on smiling now if she died for it.

"You."

"Poor at present, but rich soon. Rich as Cricky—if that's the mythological gentleman's name."

"Georgette, tell me, whether I've the right to know or not, what makes you, what *could* make you, bind yourself to so shameful a promise?"

"Absence of mind," she explained glibly. She scarcely heard her own words, so clearly was she recollecting those others: "I can't do a thing but talk—but it *will* hurt you." To drown them out, she repeated gaily: "Absence of mind. Total absence. An affliction of mine, doctor."

Her use of his title, always a trick of insolence, intending to show him that she was quite finished with him as a friend, gave him now an idea.

"If your enjoyment of these various situations is sincere," he offered professionally, "you are a callous and unpleasant woman. If, on the other hand, you are playing an unnecessary game of bluff, you are merely a mistaken one. I intend to find out which it is."

His first proceeding in this direction was to approach her, grasp her hand, and unfasten the buttoned glove upon it.

With head tentatively on one side, she surveyed

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his occupation in the complacent state of philosophic apprehension of a kitten which is letting a ribbon be tied around its neck, not certain whether it is to be adorned by it or hung.

When her wrist was bared, he gripped it over the tell-tale pulse, and took a long record of its varied beats.

Her very endeavour to control it merely added to the conflicts going on within her breast, and, against her will, against her very knowledge, she silently paid away into his practised hand confession after confession. Exhaustion, fear, contrition, bravery—each ran its unmistakable pace, delivered its unmistakable message; and finally, when he fastened his sympathetically questioning eyes on hers, her leaping heart-beats climaxed the avowal.

He let her hand fall quietly to her side, and stood before her less doctor than priest.

"You can talk to me freely," he remarked at length. "And I advise you to do it."

She bent her head and methodically busied herself refastening her glove.

Then the office bell rang imperatively.

"Destiny intervenes," burlesqued Georgette airily. "Consider me departed." She started to leave.

"I have more to say to you," he announced. "Go to that room and wait."

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So she went through the indicated door and closed it behind her, finding herself in an apartment which provided her with thoughts enough to fill up her leisure. At first view it seemed to be barren of all adornments save those of sunshine and cleanliness. But gradually its effect of bare space wore off, and an effect of beautiful, planned spaciousness took its place. The eye travelled in unobstructed paths to the cheer of open, fire-lit hearth, of bright windows. There was not much furniture, but it was all of the best. Indeed, except for the chairs, there were but two pieces—a piano and a reading-table. On the table were a massive lamp and a single book—John Congdon being a believer in just one thing at a time. Since he played by ear, not by note, the piano, too, was scrupulously guiltless of litter. Of trivial ornament the room had absolutely none, which gave tremendous value to two articles in it—a brass bowl massed with growing ferns, and a woman's portrait. This last was an oil picture hanging over the hearth, the marble mantel below being so clean and clear as to look like the woman's altar.

"Who is she?" asked Georgette promptly, when Congdon appeared, after banishing his caller.

"My mother."

"She is very pretty."

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"She is dead, Georgette."

There came a pause.

"What have you to say?" she asked gently.

He went through his characteristic preliminary of folding his arms, and the action suddenly irritated her.

"You might as well conquer that attitude," she advised. "It's intended either to keep me from breaking in, or you from breaking out, and, so far as I can see, neither calamity is at all likely to happen."

His silence was such reproach that she partly apologised.

"There's no use expecting me to be any different," she confessed rather drearily. "I have to go my own gait. And it can't be helped."

"Let us waste no time bandying words," he said, staring over her head, the better to keep his thoughts from wandering. "To go back to this marriage you contemplate making——"

"—am going to make——"

"—are going to make—it is a path leading to dishonour and ruin; the fact that a minister gives you a passport over it alters nothing."

He waited for her to defend herself, but she was mute.

"Then why do you do it?" he demanded.

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She was still mute.

"Haven't you caused unhappiness enough without topping it with your own downfall?"

"There! That's the reason," she said incoherently.

He marshalled her ejaculations into a statement.

"You are going to compensate Fate for sins committed by committing fresh ones. Is that it?"

"Don't flay and gibe. Life is downing me. Let that satisfy you. Do you want me to whine and sniffle? Well, I won't. You evidently think little of the courage of defeat."

"I think nothing of it. I believe in fighting defeat. Misery is lack of sense. Clean happiness is the birthright of humanity. No one dares cheat the soul of it."

"Don't dabble in the ideal. Your realm is materialism."

"A doctor dabbles in materialism. His realm is the ideal. The forces of life are for ever creative, not destructive. Nature works always towards health and beauty——"

"I can get all that out of the encyclopædia."

He stopped to umpire fairly the rights of this interruption, then gave ruling against it:

"Not in words capable of piercing your understanding," he explained.

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"Some of the things you say would be really funny," she commented, "if you didn't kill and embalm them first."

"There are enough funny people around without me," admitted Congdon. "A man has to keep pretty sane at times to prevent letting himself be witty."

"You're no fool, John Congdon, if that's what you mean. I'll concede you that."

"You'll concede me more before I am done with you," was his sure diagnosis. "I want to show you that you are morbidly fantastic. Illusions are disease. Facts are health."

"Then keep away from them. Health is not your speciality. Disease is your speciality, your business. Stick to it."

"I do—until it is cured."

"Or until it kills!"

"Or until it kills, Georgette."

"Oh, get to the point of all this, if there is any."

"I want you to try to hunt for the truth in jokes, not the joke in truths—that's the point. I want you to be a normal woman."

"Instead of a happy one."

"I see I have wasted my time."

"I saw that long ago. You have been insisting on impossible things. You pretend to believe, then, that happiness is a mere common duty?"

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" Yes."

" That is to say, that I, a waif of chance from the start, can claim a front seat in this orderly scheme of things ! "

" Yes."

" That the mere desire on my part is all-sufficient ? "

" Yes."

" You believe that the future depends, at any given moment, upon the present, not the past ? "

" Yes."

" That mistakes, sorrows, errors are to build us into better beings, not worse ? "

" Yes."

" That these things are blessings or curses, according only to the way we look at them ? "

" Yes."

" Then you dare to say that the home at Crooning Water can be made whole again, for mere ideal wishing ? "

" No. God pity them. No."

" And my plight is as helpless. God pity me too. Like all idealists, you talk beautifully of things you know nothing about. This time I've really gone, John. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XV

AN hour later Georgette was making a move which even her own sophistry was unable to commend.

"But as all the right things I do turn out to be wrong, I'll try doing wrong for a beneficial variety," was her ultimate decision.

And try it she did, taking the train for Crooning Water.

"At the last moment I can turn around and go back," she told herself, as she looked drowsily out of the car window, endeavouring to get a little entertainment from the flying landscape. "Where, then, is the harm in travelling? Most peaceful of Sunday occupations."

As soon as suburban trimness was left behind, the scenery became unrecognisable as the same she had passed through in the spring, for its wintry punishment of death had already set in, and bare trees, blackened fields, and wind-stripped mountains lay cold under the unsmiling sky, starkly ready for their pall of snow.

Georgette shiveringly turned from this view, and took up retrospect—which was about equally unattractive.

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"How I despise a man who refuses to know when it's raining, and goes into it bareheaded, insisting that clouds have silver linings," was her mental summary of John Congdon's attempted altruism. "I, for one, prefer to admit the storm and stay indoors, or get under an umbrella."

Her philosophy had anything but a calming effect upon her.

"And when he adopts his snatch-the-brand-from-the-burning tone, I unspeakably loathe him. When I want to get snatched from the burning, I'll notify the Fire Department."

Next the dusk fell, and then the dark. Through the heat of the car icy rills of cold trickled, and the heavier grind of the wheels upon the rail showed that the train was labouring up grade. If Georgette intended to turn around and go back, the time for it was plainly at hand.

And the three-hour trip was eternity. When she found herself again stranded on the Creston platform, she felt that she had been chilled and adrift for years. The platform was pitch-black and deserted. Up the track was a little twinkle of kerosene which was probably the station, and across the track was another moderate twinkle which was probably the inn. The store had wisely obliterated itself. Overhead, the stars were thickly blinking, looking

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more glitteringly alive and near and crowded than they ever do in cities.

And the apparently hopeless question of how to get to Crooning Water was answered before it was asked, for held up by the gate-arm across the track was a snuffing, hiccoughing touring-car, belonging to the rattle-trap catalogue—the kind of thing that the adventurous farm lad experiments with until he has delighted the old man to the point of buying him the best machine on the market.

“We ought to make Stroudsburg by half-past eight,” said one of the two polar-clad creatures in it.

Their road, then, was hers.

The gate-arm raised and the car started; so Georgette jumped on its running-board first and made her explanations afterwards.

“Will you gentlemen please take me with you?” she begged, her childishly sweet voice seeming to drop from the skies.

“Whoa!” said the owner of the car, capably addressing his steering gear.

When things had whoa-ed, Georgette stated her requirements more definitely.

The motorist condensed them for her.

“Want to go to Stroudsburg, but stop fifteen minutes at Dornblazer’s?”

“Yes,” she repeated.

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What seemed to be the only difficulty was a dark object lying at the men's feet.

"It's a sack of feed," explained the friend. "He's just got it off his uncle."

"Do you think you can sit comfortable on it?" the owner questioned Georgette.

"Oh, yes; on the feed, or your uncle, or anything," she replied adaptively.

In the starlight the men showed two rows of pleased teeth; so Georgette knew the matter was satisfactorily settled. She therefore ensconced herself on top of the sack, and the three were soon travelling, nor at any slow speed either.

"This wagon's mebbe no bute, but it goes good, don't it?" asked the prideful owner finally.

"Indeed it does," she praised heartily. "For a beast with the heavens, too."

"What say?" asked the man.

"How lucky that you were waiting for me at the cross road!"

"Every Sunday I get a sack of feed off my uncle."

"Doesn't he float considerably higher each time?"

"I don't know as he does," gave out the man, puzzled.

"He ought."

After they had jerked a long way through the dark, and slewed around several turns, the man said rather pointedly:

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"I pay him for them."

She gave no heed, but tried to decipher the way as it lurched past. Its bleakness made it confusingly new. After a fresh series of jolts and skids the man said plaintively :

"And pay him as much as he gets to town."

Her silence in regard to this must have appealed to him as disbelief, for his next belated remark was sore and resigned :

"Well, here's Dornblazer's." He stopped the engine.

"Oh, no !" cried Georgette, astonished that poor machinery could do so well what good horses did so poorly.

"You see if it isn't," muttered the man quite sulkily.

Frozen from foreboding as well as from cold, she walked through the dark skeleton of the grape arbour to the porch, across which a path of light streamed. Before entering, she studied silently and long the picture within. By the kitchen fireside sat Rachel, alone, over her hand a little stocking which she was inspecting for holes. In her winter garb of dark wool she looked like a young nun from whose face the radiance of the acolyte has passed. At her feet was stretched Sport, very gaunt and miserable, his bones preferring to be on the library sofa, his faithfulness preferring to be where it was. The

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kitchen floor was in winter garb too, its oilcloth being covered by strips of rag-carpet, clean and vivid as new wall-paper. The four window-sills were massed thickly with potted plants which had been dug up from outside and brought in to be saved for next year. On a shelf above the fire-place was an array of home-made cheeses, not yet sufficiently dried to be stored away. And from one rafter of the ceiling hung bunch after bunch of silvery onions. Once all these domestic makeshifts would have appealed to Georgette as merely grotesquely common, as funny, but they now touched a different chord, and each one told only of the forethought, the handicraft, the love, that go to the building of a home.

The children had evidently been undressed and put to bed, for on an old-fashioned wooden "horse" beside Rachel their little clothes were hanging, getting warm for the morning—three orderly little heaps, balancing on the lower rung, almost as the three children themselves would have balanced and looked down at their shoes, for each tiny pair was in its place beneath the garments.

In the room adjoining, at a table, sat Horace. A book was open before him, but his eyes were not on its pages.

Georgette opened the kitchen door and went in. Sport was on his guarding feet in a flash, a fighting

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line of hair bristling the length of his spine. Immediately lowering this, he gave a delighted mixture of yawn and howl, and wagged himself all sideways to the intruder.

Rachel rose defensively, her gentle hazel eyes growing steely as she recognised her visitor.

"Miss Verlaine, what have you come here for?" she asked at once. Then, obeying the rural instinct which relinquishes all arbitration to "him," she called tremblingly, "*Horry!*"

The distress of the cry brought him quickly, perplexity on his handsome, grave face. This perplexity cleared away instantly for a look of relief, happiness, welcome. His was a fondness which stood all tests, even the hardest test of fondness itself.

But he showed himself quietly master of his house, of himself, and of the situation.

"Rache, dear, sit down," he said. "I'll get Miss Verlaine a chair."

That best magic, the magic of the commonplace, immediately threw its protection over them all.

"I've no time to sit down," said Georgette, wearily offering commonplace in return. "I have to go back in a very few minutes." This statement of a seeming impossibility, but a desirable one, arrested Rachel's indignation, and even made claim upon her hospitality. Rachel considered hospitality

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one of those unpartisan things which *have* to be, whether or no.

So it was with more gentleness that she repeated :

“ Then why have you come, Miss Verlaine ? ”

“ Ray, I hardly know ; but there was no rest for me until I did, or for any of us, I think. I heard some of your letter to Dr. Congdon, and some of yours, Horace, and I remembered how peaceful this place was when I first came. And I kept on remembering—how you had both taken me in and cared for me. No woman but you was ever good to me before, Ray. You may think I ought not to mention what I’m going to, but I’m sure I should. Ray, I grew to love Horace—and for the same reasons that you love him—because he is earnest, hard-working, sensitive, and because his face is a beautiful one. And he grew to love me because I wanted him to and made him, as I wanted you to and made you, and wanted the children to and made them. It began as an amusement. But I amused myself until I had gone too far. I always go too far. For you to pretend to forget the wrong, Ray, will only keep it always in your mind ; so I want you to remember it instead, and, remembering, to be a little sorry for me—you have so much, I have so little. And, Horace, I want you, if you can, to keep on loving me. If you leave off, it will be because you despise me. And I could not bear to have you do that.”

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Georgette used her truths like blasting powder to shock and upheave, but to clear a way. Much that had seemed as impassable as rock crumbled to harmlessness.

"Get a chair, Horry," said Rachel suddenly. "She's tired to death."

"Not now," cried Georgette. "And indeed I have but another moment to stay. But before I go, Horace, I'd like to know if you would care to have this picture of me."

Rachel, who had plainly given up trying to judge the ways of temperamental people, drew interestedly near to see.

The picture was a character one, and showed Georgette as Sissy in "The Country School." In sunbonnet and calico frock, a strap of books swinging from one hand, she smiled from the picture a smile of such cheerful good-humour that it brought an answering smile to the face of anyone who looked.

"I'd care to have it," said Horace, taking it.

"I went to school here!" cried Georgette, breaking up without warning.

"Come upstairs and see the children," said Rachel, drawing her by the hand. "But what in the world is that?"

"That" was a hoarsely sounding horn.

"It's—it's the nephew of his uncle," translated Georgette. "I'll have to hurry."

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"Are you wondering where best to put the picture, Horry?" asked Rachel timidly. "On your desk, I think."

She took it from him gently, walked into the adjoining room, and placed it there herself.

When she came out, Horace lifted a lamp and held it at the foot of the stairs, to light her on the way to the children's room. Georgette never remembered seeing him do that before. Rachel used to carry her own lamps or do without them.

"Oh, the Paper Dolls," whispered Georgette, looking down at Pauline and Rosine asleep in bed. The pathos which for some reason or other always surrounds a sleeping child, whether naughty or good, brought a mist of tears to her eyes. She bent and kissed them softly; but her softness was unnecessary. She could have pounded kisses on them, not disturbing them in the least. Pauline and Rosine went to bed for no other purpose than to sleep. Pink-cheeked, tousle-haired, heavy-lashed, they lay like lovely little automatons, their sturdy chests heaving up and down with the regularity of machinery.

"And here's Homer," murmured Rachel, going to his crib.

Georgette bent and kissed him too; and he, with the amazing propensity of babyhood for throwing aside slumber at a moment's notice, not only woke

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but woke completely, clutching himself upright by help of the crib rails, and making businesslike preparations for getting out.

"Whoa!" advised Georgette.

"Verlaine!" said Homer, engulfing his face in a smile. Then he gabbled excitedly, "Rib. Mace. Seeb me. Seeb Homer."

"He has said that before," acknowledged Rachel, puzzled. "And I don't know what he means."

"But I do," cried Georgette, laughing delightedly. "It's 'River of my Race,' isn't it, Homer?"

"Seeb *me*," he begged, his quivering arms outstretched. "Seeb Homer."

So Georgette lifted him from his crib, and administered the envied shaking-up that used to go to Rosine.

"'River of my race,'" she intoned warningly, "'receive me'!"

And Homer hurtled rapturously through the air into the middle of Rachel's bed.

There he curled up his toes and cooed and cooed with satisfied longing. Beside him Georgette fancied she could see the shadow of a mine of diamonds.

"Come, little Cocoon, come to Verlaine," she cried yearningly, catching the baby into her arms.

Her muff tickled him, and his investigation.

"Verlaine's cat," he announced sleepily, then firmly changed it, the while he locked his fingers in

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the fur, "Homer's cat." Here he fell soundly asleep. Unable to detach him from her muff, Georgette carried him downstairs with her. The horn had summoned a second time.

"Horry, see if you can get the muff away," besought Rachel.

When Horace tried, Homer expostulated in his sleep. "Homer's cat" was his nervous explanation.

"Let him keep it," ordered Georgette. "Horace, take him from me."

She put the warm little bundle into Horace's arms, but, before relinquishing it, smiled into his eyes. "This is good night, Horace."

After the briefest of hesitations Horace answered the invitation he knew he had received. He kissed her across his sleeping child.

"Good night, Georgette."

Rachel studied the performance thoughtfully but without discontent. Moreover, she had just thought of something practical.

"You'll need some sort of a muff, Miss Verlaine, the night's so cold. And I've washed it well."

The translation of this remark was John Congdon's prison-bar sweater, which she produced from a clothes-press, odorous with sprigs of dried "lemon thyme."

"Why doesn't someone choke him!" stormed Georgette, but she was referring to the persistent

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horn-blower, not Congdon. "Don't come out with me, Ray, it's freezing."

Giving Rachel no time to draw back, she flung her arms around her and held her in a close and silent embrace.

The next minute she was running down the grape harbour to the irate motorist.

"I like your idea of fifteen minutes," he grumbled.

"Then we're both pleased," said Georgette, clambering cheerfully to the feed sack.

He used his best means of retaliation, making as jolting a start as the "beast with the heavens" was capable of, which was much.

Thinking over her visit, Georgette put her tired head down on her improvised muff, and laughed till she shook. A day's hungry travelling for the sake of exchanging a few trivial words!

"To the mountebank life is a continuous circus. I'm glad I'm a mountebank," she confided defiantly to the sweater.

Not until a dazzling burst of three electric lights came into view and proclaimed the whole of Stroudsburg, did she raise her head to look around her.

"If there's a railroad station anywhere, stop," she commanded.

Therefore the machine bumped across some tracks and stopped. Numbed and sleepy with cold, she got out of it.

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"Thank you ever so much," she said, bowing politely to both unanswering overcoats. Then, to the overcoat at the wheel, "Here's a quarter of a dollar for talking so entertainingly at the start ; and here's a dollar more for winding up so silently. *Good night.*"

She caught the nine o'clock through train, and had nearly three hours more for reflection. But down whatever hopeful avenue of thought she looked, there stood the thick-set figure of Yes Smith, blocking it. And the things about which he could "talk" to her ruin were all of her own reckless doing. She did not have to guess at his meaning. The things existed. She knew the list of them—unwise rides and meetings, private suppers, careless trips—things which at the best were indefensible from conventional point of view, and which in this case, considering the known reputation of her companion, were damning. Secure of her own strength, she had all her life derided and defied conventions, laughing at them as the fetters of weakness, only to find out too late that a woman's whole scope and freedom depends on following them. How brutally concise Yes had been in establishing the fact of his power! "I am not a gentleman." There lay the menace, and he knew it. Being what he was, he could twist the truth of a circumstance into a lie, not by distorting it, but by mere mention.

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An unquiet mind turns the discomforts of travel into positive torture. Add cold and hunger, and the combination becomes wellnigh unendurable. Georgette was dizzy with faintness when her train rolled into the terminal station and she stepped off it. Hoboken's dismal bells were chiming midnight.

"I'm afraid the next thing on the programme is a flop and a fall and an ambulance call," she thought.

Then she felt her arm taken into abrupt custody, not by a thoughtful policeman who would have done it with just that decision, but by John Congdon.

"For once I'm glad to see you," she murmured. "How did you know I was here?"

"Guesswork," he replied. "Your condition when you left my office was an unsatisfactory one. Consequently I telephoned later on. Cora said you had taken a hurried journey—by yourself. This depot was the only one which suggested itself to me. I have met every train since ten, thinking you would step off one of them."

"It's uncanny wizardry," she advanced, startled.

"It's fortunate coincidence," he contradicted. "I heartily wish, Georgette, you would marry some sensible man, any sensible man, and do it without delay. That would put a stop to your carrying out of demented ideas. No unmarried young woman is quite sane, and you least of any of them. My advice to you, my unbiased, scientific advice, is to marry."

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"Any sensible man?" queried she analytically.

"Any. One decent man is as good as another for a husband. It's a valuable fact not known as widely as it should be."

"Tut, tut! I believe in affinities."

"Affinities and the liquor habit ought to be better understood than they are. Alcohol is mistaken for a stimulant. So are affinities. As a medical truth, alcohol is a narcotic. Likewise, nothing puts a person more effectually to sleep than too much affinity."

"How interesting you can be in a depot, John!"

"I beg of you to pardon me," he ejaculated, coming to. "But I was trying to suggest a remedy for these unwarrantable actions of yours."

"I'll tell you where I've been."

"Not another word till I get you home."

He soon had her in his severely uncompromising car, and by an awkward system of driving peculiarly his own eventually landed her at her apartments.

She switched on a flood of electric light, motioned him to a chair, dropped wearily into another, and started to pull off her furs.

Midway in operations she stopped and studied the room with slowly dilating eyes, seeming to discover for the first time its every unworthy detail—the spindle-legged chairs, incongruously brocaded; the

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useless onyx tables ; the obtrusive mirror-frame whose " gold " had flaked off in many places, showing the white plaster beneath ; the wilted magnificence of flowers lolling out of ornate vases ; the confused medley of theatrical magazines and music on top of the piano whose chenille-fringed " drape " was untidily awry ; the disorderly mantel array of professional photographs, all blackly and familiarly autographed ; the faded ribbons, badges, favours, pennants pinned to the gaudy lace curtains ; in brief, all the characteristic tawdriness which she had hitherto unquestioningly accepted as seemly.

" Take me out of this," she ordered peremptorily, starting up. " John, I can't breathe in this room, much less talk." She went to him and tugged the lapel of his coat with the abandon of hysteria. " Get up. Take me to *your* room—the big clean one where your mother's portrait is. I can talk there. Come. Don't make me stand this junk-shop another minute. Hurry ! "

" Very well," he said, recognising her nerve frenzy and humouring it. " Have Cora cloak you more warmly. And bring her with you."

" Bring Cora ? " she repeated, exasperated. " Cora's the last person *I'd* think of inviting ! "

" I know she is," he said patiently. " But do as I tell you."

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His consideration understood, it so touched her heart that she immediately travestied it on her tongue.

"Cora!" she cried delightedly, hurrying off. "Get your things on. Dr. Congdon feels in need of help."

Coming back ready, she overheard his telephone to a grill-room.

"Yes. Send it. Broth. Celery. Crackers. And white grapes. To Congdon's. No. Nothing else."

"That sanitary snack for me?" she asked without much gratitude.

"Yes."

"Well," pointedly, "I'm generally consulted. And when I am, I order something far different."

"So I judged," he explained. Then, with a near approach to tenderness, "Mental excitement impedes digestion."

"Ah," she exploded, stamping her foot, "if there's one individual in the world I hate worse than another, it's a doctor!"

He went into one of his thoughtful pauses, to give this remark its full meed of attention. And he issued from it with an interesting dictum to offer in exchange.

"Nor do I entirely approve of actresses. Come, Georgette."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ride to his residence was not a long one, and the streets were alive with pedestrians, midnight or no.

"The wakeful city it is," volunteered Cora respectfully. "How late you may be going home, that makes nothing; for you always see people commencing out."

"And no matter how early you go out in the morning," extended Georgette, "that makes nothing, either; for you always see people going home."

Their way took them past a certain well-lighted house, in front of whose very substantial entrance some hopeful cabs had drawn up.

"That's the Collie Club, isn't it?" asked Georgette of Congdon.

Her voice was tired again.

"Yes; so we are almost home. Keep up your patience."

But it was not physical weariness that caused her to lean back droopingly. As in thought, so in actuality, the shadow of Yès Smith fell across the path. For she knew he was there, at the club, attending their Charter Night banquet.

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"Here we are now," said Congdon, pulling up at his own door. "And the first thing for you to do is to have some supper."

So he led her to his dining-room and made her partake of the "sanitary snack." The affair was not a function, nor was it intended to be such, and he therefore got it over very quickly. Then he set Cora to work clearing away the remains, in all senses of the words—which satisfied her spiritual hunger as well, for Cora loved to investigate a foreign *ménage*.

Entering the music-room with him, Georgette sensed thankfully its fresh, dim warmth. The clean air braced like a pine forest. A single glow on the hearth told of a log that had died down but not out. Congdon went over to it and put his entire intellect on finding out the one spot where one kick would do the whole of the work. Deciding, he administered the kick. And obeying the artistic capableness of it, the log broke in the right spot, arranged itself in a proper heap, and burst into a full length of flames.

"No niggling allowed," commented Georgette, always an admirer of thoroughness, whatever the type.

He next turned up the lamp, and the whole room was aglow, not aglare, with cheer. The solitary picture over the fire-place played quiet hostess. And

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the big piano in its niche, reflecting the leap of the flames, looked like living genii in a shrine.

"Play something," she said. She had seated herself in a chair by the hearth. Her head was lying idly back and her hands were clasped loosely in her lap. She conveyed the impression of being at home.

He went undecidedly to the piano, and then stood there with his back to it, his eyes on the satisfactory visitor at his hearth.

"Can't think of anything?" she asked, indolent and comfortable.

He folded his arms firmly across his chest, still looking at her over the top of them.

"Not musical to-night?" she went on, softly conversational.

He walked down to the mantel, and leaned against it, facing her.

Arousing to the fact of his persistent silence, she observed pleasantly :

"Never said so many things to you before without getting slapped. What's the matter? Think it's late, maybe. For me"—her wide eyes lazily on the clock—"my day never really begins till along about now."

Under his locked arms the chest heaved as if with deeply drawn breaths.

"Or are you waiting for me to tell you of the trip I've had?"

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He moved to her side, went down on one knee by her chair, his hand on the arm of it, and looked her steadily in the face with eyes that were unusually alive and brilliant.

"Georgette, to see you here, at night, by my fire-side, as I have so often dreamed, fills me with but one thought. There is no use your trying to talk to me of anything else. I want to hear only this from you—that you will stay here with me. Night after night I have fancied you there, just where you sit, just as you are. To have it come true in part only maddens me for the consummation of the whole dream. Stay with me."

Her idle, laughing glance grew earnest and radiant; then it sombred tragically.

Without a word to him, she got up slowly when he had finished speaking. She went into his office room adjoining, leaving the door open. And there she telephoned to the Collie Club.

Congdon heard some of it.

"What have you done?" he demanded, facing her sternly when she came back.

"I am going to find out!" she replied defiantly. "He is coming here."

"When?"

"Now!" She flung herself tensely back in her chair and waited.

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Congdon strode over to the piano and filled the room with Schumann's "*Am Camin*," but he saddened the exquisite allegretto of the Fireside Song into the dreariest of largos. The usually dancing notes dripped slowly as tears. And the pathos of Schumann, the sob that underlies his every melody, answered the demand put upon it. The firelit room was heavy with sorrowing harmonies. The song over, Congdon played it again and again and again, each time more slowly. There was nothing else at his finger-ends.

"You must stop. I can't bear it," said Georgette. She had risen, and had her head down upon her arms, on the mantel, beneath his mother's picture.

But he was not in a stopping humour, so played on.

Then Cora announced Yes Smith. And the music was done.

No one could deny that Yes Smith had presence. His burly compactness showed at its best in evening dress, and increased the impression of power and importance that was always his in full measure. The alert composure on his face challenged attention and won admiration. As he came slowly forward, there was true ease, not the assumption of it, in every line of him. Wines, the best of them, had put a clear keenness into his eyes. For a dissipater, Smith was not a specimen to point a moral. The only moral Smith pointed at that particular moment was that

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vice had a thoroughly improving effect upon his constitution, his feelings, and his appearance.

Greetings were soon disposed of. Smith withdrew his scant attention from his host as soon as might be, and bestowed it upon his summoner.

"You wished to see me?" he asked. He looked pointedly at her, then at Congdon, then at the room. Time and place had their oddities.

"Yes," she affirmed, a plea already in her voice. "For a few words—in private."

"In private," said Smith, addressing Congdon.

"I remain here," said Congdon.

"But if *I* begged you to leave us?" besought Georgette agitatedly.

"I'd remain here," said Congdon.

"Then do you mind going over and playing the piano?" she compromised.

"Not at all," he agreed. He went to his loved instrument and began softly to play.

Georgette refrained from asking her visitor to sit down—the hour was not a leisurely one—and she herself remained standing.

"I do not intend to keep my promise to marry you," she said swiftly. She kept her voice as low as she could, but she noticed that the music undersang it.

"Don't you think you had better." Smith gave this clearly, and not as a question.

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The words were insult. She paled under them, and her usual bravery of defiance was taken from her, for she dared not italicise the meaning of them by repetition. She shot a look at the piano, breathless. Its murmur trickled amiably on, "She is the miller's daughter, and is to me so dear, so dear!"

Smith listened attentively. When he spoke, it was with added clearness, his eyes on the studious performer.

"The gentleman seems to be in your confidence, George." A heavy pause. "I congratulate him."

Congdon left the piano and came down, putting himself closely face to face with the speaker. Georgette clenched her hands at her side, ready for a scene. But Congdon's voice was even and conventional.

"Smith, I intend to make a call on you tomorrow. And I intend to see you when I call. Where shall I find you?"

"Those who need to find me never have any difficulty about it," promised Smith promptly. "We'll arrange that later."

Congdon sauntered back to the piano.

"Play something that has a lot of chords," implored Georgette seriously.

His obedience was immediate. The heart-harrowing, crashing, terrible chords of Chopin's

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Funeral March throbbed through the room. And private conversation was completely possible.

"Let's put this act through quickly," ordered Georgette, as to her leading man. She was as white as a dead woman except for the crimson curve of her lips.

"Count upon me to hurry;" agreed Smith, watching her narrowly.

"You have plenty of money, haven't you?"

"Plenty."

"And power?"

"And power."

"And friends?—such as they are."

"Such as they are."

"And you've done it without help, by yourself?"

"By myself."

"Yet, all your life, you've just missed it, just missed it, Yes, haven't you?"

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. Haven't you?"

"I've 'just missed it,' George."

"Do you know why?"

"I know why."

"It's because you never had a square deal when you were little, isn't it?"

"I never had a square deal."

"Neither did I, Yes. So you know what that means. You told me you were not a gentleman.

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I'm going to find help in it, for you'll know all that I've been up against from the start. Think what it's been for you. It's been harder for me. I've gone all ways but one. But one. Don't take that solitary credit away from me. Not a gentleman, you say. But a man. That's enough. Play a man's game with me. I've needed a square deal all my life, and never more than now. Give it to me. A square deal, •Yes. And *a fair shuffle.*"

"Tell me what you want."

"To break my promise. Without danger."

"Danger to you?"

"And to—to him."

"What did you make it for?"

"Not for love, at any rate. I had none for you, and you knew it. You had none for me."

"Leave that out. You don't know that it's true. What made you promise?"

"Your money. It was something. I thought I would take what I could. For I could not get what I wanted."

"What was it you wanted?"

"This—a quiet fireside—though I did not know it. That—music, from a man I—I—care for, and have always cared for. Even if it *be* a funeral march! Yes, I am so tired, so tired of the losing fight. I want to be——"

"What?"

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"Only—a woman."

"Curse you," he said softly, dropping the words like a benediction, as they were. "Why couldn't you have loved me that way? And stuck to me. I'd have stuck to you. And, by God, I'll stand by you now, George, though you don't deserve it. Have what you want."

"Oh, please go, please go, while I can keep my voice steady enough to say good night. I'll write what I think of you. Good night."

"Good night."

Hearing the farewells, Congdon got up from the piano and came down to participate.

"How about that meeting-place?" he reminded.

"I don't need to see you, nor you me."

"Good night," said Congdon, extending his hand.

Smith looked at it movelessly. "Because you are to marry the woman I love, is that any reason why I should take your damned hand?"

"None," said Congdon.

"Good night."

The room was very quiet for long after he had gone. Georgette was in her chair again, and life was flushing slowly back to her cheeks.

Congdon folded his arms very thoughtfully. Something was on his analytical mind.

"Georgette," he asked finally, "what did he mean by saying I was to marry you?"

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"Nobody knows!" she answered curtly.

This required help from the piano. Going to it, he set it all a-ripple with "*Am Camln*" in its original allegretto. For one who had just been crashing out the mightiest of chords, his quick delicacy of touch was almost unbelievable. Had breeze and sunlight played, they would have sounded no gentler.

Then he wandered down to the mantel, and stood there, below his mother's portrait.

"Come here, Georgette."

The barricade was not across his chest. It saw lowered. The way was unobstructed.

She went to him and stood at his side, looking down into the fire with him. It was quite some time before he put his arm around her and held her tightly to him. He said nothing, for there was nothing to say. Which was inevitably her cue to speak.

"John, pardon me if it's none of my business, but—but when are you going to give me that kiss, the kiss *later*?"

He had been thinking, evidently, of the same thing, for he had his answer ready. But it came slowly:

"Not till you are my wife, Georgette."

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From the opening, when we find the worthless, unscrupulous Stanley Pole with his secretary, John Hammond, this narrative grips attention. With the latter stepping so strangely into the shoes of the former and succeeding to the Peerage, one sensation is followed by another. John Hammond finds that he has to take on himself the dreadful consequences of the wickedness of the young reprobate into whose place he has come. Incident succeeds incident, and interest is well sustained throughout. But working in and out through all the vicissitudes of a complicated plot, involving many well-drawn characters, the devoted, beautiful love of Joan shines out star-like, and in the issue redeems the hero, bringing a thrilling narrative to a triumphant close. This story is indeed the apotheosis of a true woman's impassioned love.

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